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Third phase of Treehouse project in Easthampton an energy saver

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EASTHAMPTON — Whoever ends up buying a home at a subdivision under construction off Park Street in Easthampton is going to save on electric bills.

The first of 33 "net-zero" homes is being built at the Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow development, a foster and adoptive community in operation since 2004. Designed by R. Carter Scott of Transformation Inc. in Townsend, the homes, which will start at \$310,000, will have the capacity to generate as much electricity as they consume. Nine of the 33 homes will be priced to meet affordable guidelines for first-time home buyers.

The \$13 million project, called The Homes at Easthampton Meadow, is the third and final phase of the Treehouse project, an innovative community of foster and adoptive parents and their children, which also includes homes on the upper portion of the property closest to Park Street.

The Treehouse Foundation is the developer of the new homes, which aren't technically considered a part of the adoptive community, said foundation president Pamela Goodman.

But it will be up to the buyers to determine what role they wish to play.

"We think there's some people that really care about living in an intentional community," Goodman said.

In fact, Goodman said, several current Treehouse residents have expressed interest in purchasing one of the homes.

There may also be buyers who would prefer to keep to themselves, noted David Ryan, the selling agent for the project, with Coldwell Banker Upton-Massamont Realtors in Florence.

"There may be people who choose not to be a part of the community, and that's fine," Ryan said.

Slowed market

The Treehouse Foundation has been waiting to start the third and final phase of its Button Road development. But the economy and housing market gave them pause.

"It's not unintentional that we weren't in the ground a year ago," Goodman said.

Treehouse partnered with Transformations Inc. after hearing about Scott, who has been building net-zero homes since 2008. His work has been featured on the Discovery Channel and he has won awards from Energy Star as well as the Zero Energy Challenge in 2008, in which electric utilities issued a challenge to builders to erect the most efficient home they could.

Scott has designed two large net-zero communities in the Massachusetts towns of Harvard and Townsend, totaling 64 homes, and is working on five others in that area. Treehouse will be his largest project to date.

Scott said that in his experience, people who buy homes he designs want two things.

"The motivating factors are that they're saving money, and the second is it's environmentally friendly," Scott said.

The homes at Treehouse will have 12-inch-thick walls, triple-pane glass windows coated in krypton, extra thick insulation, and are designed to maximize natural light.

The homes will be so well sealed, Scott said, that it takes the same amount of energy that would power two blow dryers to heat the home to 70 degrees. The homes use about one-twentieth of the electricity of an average home, Scott said.

"You get a very, very energy-efficient home," he said.

Optional solar

The homes, which will be available in nine different models, will have two, three or four bedrooms and will start at 1,496 square feet. The "Farmhouse" home will act as the model home for the development. Developers say it will be finished by February.

Taken as built, Scott's homes will generate 60 percent of the energy their owners will use on average.

Scott and the Treehouse Foundation both hope that whoever buys the homes will opt to pay for the installation of solar panels, which would bring the homes to a full 100 percent energy savings.

Because of tight financing from banks, Treehouse will not build all 33 homes at once, Goodman said. Developers plan to build nine of the homes first and sell some as they go. Three of the homes in the first phase of project will be deeded affordable.

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