

Alabama

# Green home-building catching on in Birmingham during slump

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Michelle Williams/Birmingham News

A big part of green construction is taking care of on-site waste. Emmit Stallworth, managing member of Alpha Home Builders, breaks down boxes to be recycled at a spec home he is building in Hoover's Trace Crossings neighborhood. The pile of shredded lumber also is set for recycling.

As metro Birmingham home builders start to dip their toes into the green building trend that's sweeping the country, one has a new project that aims to meet strict requirements for efficiency and sustainability while not yet having a buyer in sight.

Emmit Stallworth of Alpha Home Builders is building a five-bedroom, four-bath house in Hoover's Trace Crossings neighborhood that, when finished, is expected to have four separate certifications from national, regional and state agencies involved in the green building movement.

He's building the house on a speculative basis, a move that's becoming more popular across the country as a growing number of green features can be added at minimal cost.

Stallworth says the expected energy savings attached to the house -- 20 to 30 percent -- should help it stand out in a slow market. At the same time, however, the house blends in well with others in the community.

"People think a green-constructed home is going to look like a mushroom or have solar panels everywhere," Stallworth said. "But you won't be able to look at it and tell it's a green-constructed home."

Stallworth's project, at 1473 Scout Ridge Drive, is in the pipeline to be certified under the **National Association of Home Builders' National Green Building Program**. So far the program, which started more than a year ago to set quantifiable standards for green home construction, has certified only one other house in the state, in Point Clear.

Across the country, the program has certified 160 homes, with another 200 in the pipeline, said Carlos Martin, assistant staff vice president for the Washington-based NAHB. And while the certified homes are a mix of custom builds and spec projects, custom builders primarily started the industry's green building movement, he said.

"What we're finding is that now it's becoming more mainstream," Martin said, adding that simple green features such as energy efficient lighting and window overhangs that filter sunlight are being seen even in lower-cost starter homes. "It really is transforming the industry."

Part of the challenge for those involved in the green building movement is educating home buyers about its benefits, Martin said, especially if some features haven't hit the mainstream yet.

For example, Stallworth's house will have dual-flush toilets with two buttons -- one for flushing solids and another for flushing liquids. It's a water-saving measure that ends up saving homeowners on their utility bills.

Other features of the house include aluminum-clad windows that require less maintenance, paperless Sheet Rock that reduces the growth of mold and a passive radon control system that improves air quality.

Also meant to improve air quality and lower heating and cooling bills is the house's "extremely tight construction," accomplished by using lumber engineered specifically for certain spaces and strong sealants around light fixtures, duct work and insulation, Stallworth said.

A big part of green building happens during the construction process itself, as builders aim to recycle all their waste. For example, the lumber debris at Stallworth's house has been ground up to be used as mulch in the yard.

A green-constructed house typically costs a little more than others to buy, Martin said, although homeowners can expect to reap savings in energy costs. But Stallworth says the price tag of his house, at \$598,000, is slightly below some regularly-built houses in the neighborhood.

He attributes that to some trade-offs associated with green building, such as the use of advanced framing techniques that require less lumber. Stallworth also is a one-man shop with little overhead: He builds four to five houses a year, hires subcontractors and personally supervises each project.

A builder for seven years, Stallworth said he decided to take on green construction because he got tired of seeing homeowners squeezed by rising utility bills.

Across metro Birmingham, the green building movement is in its infancy when it comes to residential construction, said Bart Fletcher, executive vice president for the Greater Birmingham Association of Homebuilders.

But that's changing. A lot of area homebuilders have used the current slowdown in the market to take classes on green building, and they're paying attention to its increasing importance in the industry, Fletcher said.

"Anytime something new comes along, there's a certain period of time that people have to go through to make sure it's not a flash in the pan and it's here to stay," he said. "Green building has certainly fulfilled that. I think everybody understands and agrees that green building is the way things are headed."

Elsewhere in the Birmingham area, builder Mike Wedgworth is planning a subdivision of green-built houses, called Viridian, in Vestavia Hills, Fletcher said.

The marketplace will ultimately determine whether green homes become more commonplace across Alabama, but the fact that industry groups have proactively embraced the trend enhances that probability, said Grayson Glaze, executive director of the Alabama Center for Real Estate at the University of Alabama.

He added that green building techniques also are consistent with President Obama's energy policies, which could fuel the trend.

Work on Stallworth's house is scheduled to be complete in two months. By then, he expects to have passed inspections and received certifications from the NAHB's Green Building Program, as well as Green EnergyKey, a state home builders program, and Energy Star, a national rating program for a home's appliances and heating and cooling systems.

The house also is in the pipeline to be certified by EarthCraft House, an Atlanta-based green building program that has certified 5,000-plus homes across the Southeast.

Steve Christenson, regional program manager for EarthCraft, said the program has certified just two other homes in the Birmingham area.

"I would like to think that for anybody who is building green houses on the spec market, having a green certification certainly would help them stand out," he said.

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