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Local Man Takes 'LEED' on Luxury Development

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A large home that's certifiably energy efficient — it might sound like contradiction, but it's being done at Windermere on the Lake. New Canaanite Mark Robbins is the developer overseeing the project.

A nearly 8,000-square-foot, four-bedroom home has earned certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building rating system. It is the first LEED-certified home in Windermere, but it shouldn't be the last.

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MARK ROBBINS
NRD RESIDENTIAL

Twenty-three more luxury "green" houses are planned for the 74-acre conservation development in Stamford's Long Ridge section. Each one should meet the same LEED standards, Robbins said, but it's the future homeowner's decision to follow through with the certification.

"If the owner wants to live up to that commitment, the houses are designed to meet that specification. But they need to apply," Robbins told the *News-Review*.

These larger-than-average houses — they have between 4,500 to 8,000 square feet of living space, compared to the typical 2,500 square feet — must earn more points in the LEED rating system to attain the same level of certification as a smaller house.

"To get LEED certification on a house is a Herculean effort. It's like getting an efficiency hybrid rating on a tractor trailer," Robbins said.

The showcase Windermere home earned 68 points out of the 136 points available.

It needed to earn at least 63 points to qualify, said Maureen Mahle, a consultant with Steven Winter Associates. The architectural and engineering consulting firm, which specializes in green technology, worked with Windermere to reach LEED certification.

She said a smaller home might have to earn 35 points for the same rating, but the Windermere home needed an additional 28 points to compensate for its larger size.

"(The sliding scale) has been a really controversial aspect of this rating system," Mahle said. "It's only one that I know of that penalizes you for being larger."

Single custom homes in Bethany, Glastonbury and Essex have earned LEED certification, but they are smaller and not in the luxury market.

"They're all nice custom homes," said Mahle, who helped with those houses. "Windermere is definitely a more luxurious home ... It's in a different price class."

The market price for the homes ranges from \$3.2 million to \$4.8 million.

Windermere also differs because it is an overall green development. Mahle said nothing like it is under construction in the state yet, but about eight developments are in the works.

"Developments of any size take quite a long time, so we've gotten initial interest," she said. "Windermere is one of the first developments to get in the ground."

She said similar projects have begun in Northern Virginia, D.C. Maryland and New York.

Robbins also called Windermere the first luxury eco-village in Northeast.

Of the 75 acres at Windermere, two-thirds will remain undeveloped. Robbins said 25 acres was donated to the Stamford Land Trust and another 25 acres will serve as open space within the development.

"We conserve on site, work with contours that exist, remove invasive species and are working in a way to ultimately enhance the erosion control system in place and enhance biodiversity," he said. "When we say the site is green with development, design and thought, the site itself is really the true conservation development. We're leaving the land better than when it started. This makes it a conservation development before you even get to the houses."

The lots the houses sit on also follow that philosophy — each one has a half-acre lot. Windermere offers several shared amenities, such as a clubhouse, pool, tennis court and gazebo.

"It's an approach to living with communal resources than being isolated in your own little kingdom. It's about bringing people out of their homes to walk on the trail, to play tennis," Robbins said. "It's not about the size of the lot. There's 75 acres to enjoy."

The homes also do not crowd each other. They are all designed to sit within the landscape to provide a view of the lake or a



Contributed photos

Mark Robbins is overseeing the development of Windermere on the Lake, which combines large luxury homes with energy efficiency and conservation.

meadow instead of a neighboring house. Further, he said the clustered layout maximizes open space.

"There's no bad lot," he said. "Each one is spectacular and majestic in its own right."

The house arrangement also mimics the set up of the English cottages around Lake Windermere in Cumbria County, the inspiration for the development, he said.

"As a company, we want to showcase a better way of building and land use," said Robbins, who works for NRDC Residential. "It's not a subdivision, it's about architecturally informed plans. This is a conservation development, which I think really represents the apex of land planning."

That planning began about five years ago and the project broke ground last year.

Windermere's one complete house serves as a showcase and two others are under construction. The clubhouse, pool, tennis court and gazebo are also in progress.

All the design plans for the 24 houses are established, but Robbins said, the build out should happen by contract over the next three to five years based on the market.

Windermere houses will follow one of four architecture styles: Cumbria, Westmorland, Durham and Lancashire. And each house, regardless of the specific style, resembles an English manor and emulates the work of C.F.A. Voysey of the 19th-century English Arts and Crafts movement.

"We wanted to show that green design and a sustainable project can be beautiful," Robbins said. "Green architecture can put a smile on your face, it's not a concrete box with small windows and a windmill."

Instead, these large houses offer a kitchen with a Wolf stove range, a Sub-Zero

refrigerator and custom cabinetry. Every home will also have a garden designed especially for that property.

Homeowners can also select from a range of additional luxury options for inside and outside of the home to semi-customize it to their preferences. The finished basement in the showcase home, for instance, has a wine cellar, home theater and mirrored fitness room in its basement.

Despite the house's luxuries and large size, Robbins said the average utility bill should total around \$500 a month. He said the 250 square-foot office trailer at Windermere costs about \$100 more a month more to heat, cool and light.

Along with use of natural daylight, Robbins said, the houses' modern green features further cut heating, cooling and lighting costs. The homes have Energy Star-rated windows, hybrid thermal insulation and heat recovery ventilators that circulate fresh air in and stale air out of the house, he said.

The economy and slumping housing market are not a deterrent for Robbins. He said he knows the houses at Windermere will sell. Purchase contracts are already out for the completed house and a lake and meadow lot. Robbins said several other people have already expressed an interest in buying one of the homes.

"Good design, good construction, good architecture creates value that'll be appreciated and endure," Robbins said. "We wanted to deliver on a formula that we think has been missed in a market of unlimited growth and just consuming. We wanted to step back and build quality."

More information is available at www.windermereonthelake.com.



The side view of the showcase home reveals its use of natural light.