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Local LEEDs building trend

By Kimberly Nevas
Reporter

Just how “green” can an 8,000-square foot luxury home, complete with a movie theater and wine cellar, actually be?

The answer: Green enough to be the first house in Fairfield County certified by the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, program – a vigorous third-party evaluation process that encourages building to minimize waste, local and sustainable sourcing of materials, as well as all-around efficiency.

That title belongs to Cumbria, the first model home at Windermere on the

Lake in North Stamford, a 74-acre, upscale eco-village-in-progress, headed by New Canaanite and National Realty & Development Corp. (NRDC) Residential division President Mark H. Robbins.

With four finished levels and a footprint of just 2,500 square feet, the home uses half the energy of a code-built house of the same size, and less energy than his 250-square-foot construction trailer, he said.

“LEED looks not at how big or how small, it looks at how good. It’s about building a better product, rather than building a smaller one,” he continued. “If you’re going to have a large home, why not do it like this?”

Combining a local prefer-

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NRDC Residential President and New Canaanite Mark H. Robbins stands at the entrance to Windermere on the Lake in North Stamford, an environmentally minded development that includes the first LEED-certified home in Fairfield County.

Windermere: New Canaan executive builds green

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ence for big houses with post-"Inconvenient Truth" consciousness, NRDC Residential's inaugural green development is to feature 24 luxury homes on half-acre lots, ranging in size from 4,000- to 8,000 square feet, and clustered in an "English country village-inspired community of lakefront homes and gardens."

Prices range from \$3.2 to \$4.8 million.

"I hope this will serve as a showcase for sustainable development ... that this is the standard for elegant and sophisticated, socially responsible development," Robbins said. "Green doesn't have to be a concrete bunker with a windmill on it."

Buyers choose from varying "shades of green" by selecting sustainable building materials, carpets and paints low in volatile organic compounds — such as carcinogens benzene and formaldehyde — and geothermal heating and cooling systems.

Building to LEED standards is optional, and often adds cost.

"It's not something you can just get into half-way into construction," he said of the certification process. "You have to get started early on."

All the houses are to be Energy Star-qualified, a LEED prerequisite for energy efficiency.

Because LEED for Homes standards progressively raise the threshold for houses in excess of 2,850 square feet, getting homes like those in Windermere certified is no easy task — "It's like getting a hybrid tractor-trailer," the executive quipped.

The Cumbria model makes up for its size with geothermal heating and cooling, a renewable energy system that takes advantage of the earth's constant temperature of about 55 degrees. In the winter, heat is absorbed through underground pipes and used to warm the house; in summer, the pump works in reverse.

A heat recovery ventilator keeps the indoor environment fresh by trading stale air from inside with fresh air from outdoors. It saves energy by transferring heat from the outgoing exhaust air to the incoming fresh air, before it's distributed to rooms via the ventilation system.

Environmental pedigree aside, Robbins said what he's building is "not your typical McMansion."

Named for locales in England's Lake District, Windermere's four home designs — Cumbria, Durham, Lancashire and Westmorland — are inspired by turn-of-the-19th Century Arts and Crafts movement architect

C. F. A. Voysey.

His use of reclaimed wood, stone and unpainted surfaces in his English country cottages "before it was vogue" made Voysey an early part of the green building movement, Robbins said.

Cumbria's cedar-shingled roof scrolls down to hip-height garden walls, bringing down the model home's mass and creating a privacy screen. In other designs, towers are used to let in natural light.

Individual homes will be oriented to maximize southern exposure and use low current light-emitting diode bulbs that may never need replacement, but the green aesthetic extends far beyond, from a lakeside reclaimed-wood gazebo to a solar-heated clubhouse swimming pool.

Residents must agree to a habitat management plan that forbids the use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, and encourages drought-tolerant plants.

Rather than fragment wildlife habitat, 25 contiguous, wooded acres of Windermere are to remain as open space. Another 25 acres were donated to the Stamford Land Conservation Trust, the largest single gift of land in the trust's history.

Wooden pallets placed in ponds are breeding habitats for newts

and salamanders, Robbins said, and thousands of wetland plants provide natural storm water management.

Van-sized, underground vortex units and bio-filters are part of a drainage plan he said will emit drinking-quality water, "so any storm water discharged onto the property is cleaner than when it got here."

"They're not buying just that house, but a fractional interest in a 74-acre estate," he said. "It's a holistic approach to a lifestyle that exceeds the bounds of any lot. It's not like living near Central Park, it's like living in the park. This is the amenity."

To minimize fuel consumption, all of the stone used for walls and chimneys was gleaned from existing farm walls on-site. Roads are being built with earth that was displaced by building foundations.

Even the geese that ate \$60,000 worth of aquatic plants will be dealt with humanely — Robbins said he signed a one-year contract for a man in a kayak and two border collies to chase them off three times a day.

Despite the bleak housing market, Robbins said earlier this month he already has contracts out for some of the home sites, and the earliest move-in could be just weeks away.

According to a report by

McGraw-Hill Construction, green home building is set to account for six to 10 percent of the housing market this year, generating between \$12 billion and \$20 billion in sales, and doubling over the next five years.

Green homes were just two percent of the market in 2005, with sales of \$7 billion, according to the company.

"Green is booming," said Karla Donnelly of Steven Winter Associates in Norwalk, whose firm provided environmental consulting for Windermere. "Builders are looking at it as a marketing tool that helps differ-

entiate them from the norm."

People in the market for homes like those at Windermere aren't likely to be driven by rising energy costs, said firm President and architect Steven Winter. Instead, he said, prospective buyers tend to be environmentally concerned, health-conscious families with children, who want constant air circulation and vapor barriers to keep their homes free of mold and mildew.

"A lot of architects are in financial trouble, but we've never had so much work in our lives," he said. "Green is carrying the day. Green is the flavor of the year."

Hours:

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ally expand the amount of time Town Hall is open for business.

"I've been asking for a long time to figure out how can we do a better job of extending services," he said, comparing Town Hall to Nordstrom and saying that he has heard from "a number of people" who have trouble completing their municipal tasks before or after work.

The Board of Selectmen last week approved — two to one, with Rob Mallozzi dissenting —

giving the four-day week a try. A progress report will be presented after one month.

The primary motivation for this trial period, Walker said, is to "put us in a position to give better service" and be more efficient.

"And," he added, "we may save a few dollars."

Benefits are an estimated \$30,000 in savings and boosted employee morale, according to a July 22 presentation by Manager of Human Resources Cheryl Jones.

— Colleen Flaherty contributed to this story

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