

EarthCraft House Helps Atlanta Grow Green

While national experts debate the short-term strength of the housing market, it's clear that the next decade will bring continued growth to the metro Atlanta area. The Atlanta Regional Commission projects the population will increase by about a million people over the next decade.

This increase will put additional pressure on the region's water and air resources and transportation, energy and solid waste infrastructure. However, EarthCraft House builders and community developers demonstrate practical, economical ways to reduce these burdens.

EarthCraft House certification can also help builders weather short-term market dips. Today's home buyers often conduct considerable research before they arrive at the threshold of a model home. While quality of schools, proximity to services and house size, layout and price always will be important priorities, home buyers are increasingly aware of rising energy and water costs, healthy building concerns and maintenance requirements. Of particular concern is the rising cost of energy for homes and transportation. Average U.S. households will pay nearly \$5,000 to power their homes and vehicles this year, which is 32 percent more than just two years ago.

With ENERGY STAR certification a requirement of the EarthCraft House program, savvy builders can show prospective buyers that their new homes will have significant savings on energy bills. These savings can help secure energy-efficient mortgages or just help home buyers stretch household budgets.

Georgia home builders can also directly benefit from constructing ENERGY STAR homes. Georgia Power is currently offering a \$300 per home rebate for all-electric ENERGY STAR homes. This rebate is in addition to other builder incentives offered by Georgia Power. Other electric and natural gas utilities across the state have indicated they will provide similar incentives in the coming months.

The financial incentives available to builders for ENERGY STAR and EarthCraft House certification are not limited to single family homes. Recently, Georgia followed Vir-



ginia's lead in offering incentives for EarthCraft House and ENERGY STAR under the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program. These tax credits are targeted primarily for affordable multifamily projects. The first year after Virginia recognized EarthCraft House, more than 50 percent of its tax credit projects were green, representing several hundred housing units. The state predicts that year two will see

even more success. The federal tax credits are administered in Georgia by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), which anticipates similar success to that of Virginia. DCA also provides incentives for single family EarthCraft homes under its Georgia Dream Homeownership Program (www.dcaloans.com).

In addition to these local incentives, EarthCraft House builders are beginning to stretch

their energy features to be eligible for the federal energy tax credit for new homes. At the close of 2006, Congress extended this credit until the end of 2008, and many feel that the 2007 Congress will strengthen it even more. The federal tax credit requires that a new home cut energy use for heating and cooling by 50 percent.

With relatively modest energy upgrades, many EarthCraft House builders can take advantage of the \$2,000 per home federal tax

credit. EarthCraft House has developed several "typical" upgrade packages, which are available at www.earthcrafthouse.org. Eligibility for the federal tax credits requires a Home Energy Rating plus field inspection.

While financial incentives provided by federal and state government and utilities can help strengthen the market for high performance homes, builders hold the real key. In one of the most comprehensive market surveys done to date of high-performance, ener-

gy-efficient homes, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) found that a builder's sales staff is essential to selling green. In the study of more than 300 homes in the San Diego area built by SheaHomes, NREL found that the rate of home buyers choosing energy technologies jumped from 12 percent to 44 percent when sales agents educated the buyer.

And perhaps the most telling finding of the NREL study concerns home buyer satisfaction. Builder reputation and resulting word of mouth advertising is a major influence on potential home buyers. The NREL study found that 77 percent of buyers of high-performance homes were satisfied with their builder versus 67 percent of standard home buyers.

The more than 4,000 homes certified under the EarthCraft House program represent a significant voice for the advantages of high-performance green homes.

For information on EarthCraft House and tax credits available to EarthCraft House homes and builders, contact the EarthCraft House hotline at (404) 604-3636 or visit www.earthcrafthouse.org.

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