

GREEN'S THE THING



First-time homebuyers, energy efficient projects help spur housing sector growth here

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By Dick Hughes Contributing Writer

Ann Wynn lives in principle. Literally. When she moved from California to Simpsonville to be near her daughter and son-in-law, she wanted a house she needed, no more, no less.

She wanted it energy efficient and environmentally friendly to lower utility costs and to save trees on the mostly wooded seven acres where her daughter's family has a home.

She wanted one floor, one big bedroom, wide doors, levers

instead of knobs and a galley kitchen like she knew as a United Airlines flight attendant.

It's all practical stuff for a 65-year-old raised in a committed California Sierra Club family and who intends to live out her life in what probably will be her last home, reusing, recycling, reducing and preparing.

Wynn got what she wanted, a compact house with, among other features, "attic space so well insulated that it pretty much stays at the same temperature as the house," ceiling >

> fans to circulate air, insulated windows and 36-inch doors "in case I have to be in a wheelchair or on a walker."

Wynn's electric utility bill for 2008 was \$419 and that includes heating and cooling. She can go months without running either.

Wynn's 896-square-foot house was built by Todd Usher of Addison Homes for \$110,000. That's \$122 per square foot, reasonable even by the going rate for mass production houses.

While working at Milliken, Usher earned an MBA at night in 1996 and started buying and fixing up homes for rental to satisfy an entrepreneurial urge. Seven years ago, at age 32, Usher dropped out of his desk job to found Addison Homes with his wife Michelle, who had been at Milliken 15 years.

After an "ah-hah moment" at a building class, he became certified as an Energy Star and EarthCraft builder of green homes and set off on a mission to demonstrate that houses can be built to rigorous certification standards at affordable prices.

"So many of the approaches we take don't add costs," he said in an interview at his offices in Greer.

"They actually reduce costs if they are done efficiently. So it comes back to the question: will it cost more? It really doesn't have to. To have a basic shell built to a much higher performance standard should not cost more money."

Which is not to say, added options don't cost money.

"They may or may not have an associated payback that can justify the cost," he said.

He cited a grey water system in his lobby he soon will install for a homeowner.

"It will take water from the shower and tub and treat it to use to flush the toilet, so you use the water twice. There's not a very good payback for the \$3,000 - \$5,000 that is going to be added to the cost of a home, but that was something she wanted to do."

To prove the point of affordability, Usher works with the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority and Habitat for Humanity of Greenville County to build



Todd Usher, president of Addison Homes, visits a job site where one of the company's homes is being built.

houses that meet certification standards of Energy Star and EarthCraft.

His work received national attention in Home Energy magazine, *Upstate Forever* named him Sustainable Communities Champion for 2008, and he won the Environmental Stewardship Award of the Upstate chapter of the US Green Building Council.

Monroe Free, executive director of Habitat for Humanity, said savings in energy and maintenance far outweigh the additional \$3,000 added to a typical Habitat house, which averages \$75,000. Energy efficiency saves up to 30 percent on operational costs, he said.

Trained volunteers perform the labor. While some of the additional cost is covered by foundations, Free said, green building puts pressure on Habitat's \$2.2-million budget and forces the organization to work extra hard at fundraising. Habitat has built 16 houses this year and has a goal of 17 in 2010. It has just under 100 families in homes, he said.

For Usher, the point is that if Habitat can do it, anybody can. He is so convinced of a broader market for energy-efficient and environmentally friendly homes that Addison is "putting together a portfolio of lower-priced homes that would appeal to a

larger range of buyers."

With his strong niche in green building, Usher has not been hurt by the economic collapse that has seen Greenville County's single-family building permits plummet from 2,518 in 2007 to 1,346 in 2008 and 651 through the first nine months of this year. In the City of Greenville, permits fell from 174 in 2007 to 125 in 2008.

He is looking ahead to expansion.

"We average 10 homes a year. We have five, soon to be six, homes that will start before the end of the year, which for us is a very busy last quarter of the year. These are all custom pre-sold homes."

He sees the next level as 30 homes a year.

Addison has five employees, including Usher and his wife, and because the company stays busy, Usher's stable of subcontracting craftsmen stay busy.

"We tend to have very little turnover in our trades. We're trying to hold to the goal of keeping two or three deep in each of the functional trade areas so we have the ability to grow without straining our trade force."

He said in 10 years, it won't be 'green building,' it will just be 'building.'"

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