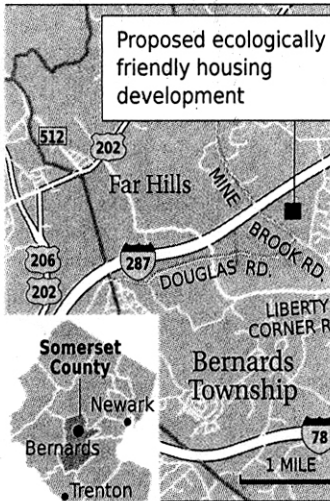


# Sunday Star-Ledger

## Developers looking at 'eco-luxury' lifestyle Builders explore recyclable materials

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By JEANETTE RUNDQUIST, STAR-LEDGER STAFF



The walls will be insulated with shredded blue jeans, and the gardens water with rain collected from the roofs.

The houses will resemble old farm buildings, built with recycled barn wood and surrounded by meadows. The residents will share an orchard and possibly even honey-producing beehives.

Going "green" is the latest buzzword from supermarkets – some now selling reusable grocery bags – to commercial buildings and schools – many touting their energy efficiency. Now, some residential neighborhoods in New Jersey are starting to turn up the green, too.

"I think the time has come to look for alternatives to conventional McMansions out in farm fields," says Anthony Sblendorio, a landscape architect and developer of a 12-home project proposed in Bernards called Ecological Solutions for Mine Brook Road.

Houses would be built with recycled materials and high-energy efficient heating systems. A man-made wetland would filter stormwater, and collection system would "harvest" rainwater for gardening. Homes would look like farms, set back from the road and surrounded by meadows.

All this may appeal to the upscale environmentalist. While Sblendorio said the houses' sale price is not settled, documents submitted to Bernards' planning board estimated them at \$3.5 million to \$6 million. The homeowners' association fee may include a service providing cut firewood to residents' homes, and fresh flowers in their flowerpots, he said.

"What we're offering is not just a house, it's a full eco-luxury lifestyle," he said.

The neighborhood would be one of the first single-family home communities in the state built to be green. While there are about 1,600 units of green multi-family affordable housing, according to the Rutgers Center for Green Building, and a few single houses are built or in the works, entire green neighborhoods are rare.

"There are a handful of upscale homes here and there, I can't point to a whole subdivision," said Jenn Senick, executive director of the Rutgers center.

Green houses are environmentally friendly. They use water and energy efficiently, avoid paints with harmful chemicals, often have natural landscaping, and may use recycled cement siding, carpet made from recycled plastic bottles or insulation made of shredded cotton, including old jeans.

"It's the combination. We should have been building like this all along," said Andrew Topinka, chairman of the New Jersey chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council.

## Think Green

Green building is encouraged by legislation, such as a proposed bill authorizing New Jersey towns to include a green element in their master plans, and voluntary programs. The building council is developing voluntary criteria for houses and neighborhoods called Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED.

About nine multifamily housing projects and 13 single homes are seeking LEED certification in New Jersey, officials said, and one house is certified. Sblendorio said he has not decided yet whether to do so.

Building on a redeveloped site or “brownfield” is one way of building green. But experts say neighborhoods like the one proposed in Bernards, for 89 acres of untouched land, can be made green, too.

“The answer is, compared to what? Is that development more green than conventional building on virgin land? The answer is yes,” Senick said.

Sblendorio said builders need to think green on every project. “We cannot continue to build and design things conventionally,” he said.

The Bernards site was first proposed for a church, but that plan fell through in 2005. Sblendorio’s firm, Back to Nature, which worked on a private school in Gladstone that won recognition for its “green-ness,” now has an option to buy the land.

The developer requested new zoning to cluster houses, and set them back 200 feet from the road to resemble farmsteads. About 60 percent of the 89-acre site will be open space; original zoning called for 3-acre lots and no open space.

“They were hoping to get something more in tune with the agricultural value of the neighborhood,” said Bernards Township Engineer Peter Messina.

The neighborhood will also offer nature activities for kids and “integrated community agriculture” for residents to share. Following a planning board review this week, the project is expected to be scheduled for public hearing. Mark MaGrann, whose engineering and energy consulting firm helps certify LEED houses, said building green costs more. But builders hope green houses will sell for more, too.

Five years ago, he built his family’s home in Medford with geothermal heating and cooling systems, siding made of recycled cement and newsprint, and patio stones made nearby in Pennsylvania to minimize resources used to transport them.

The materials cost 9 percent more than the norm back then. The tradeoff: MaGrann said his house costs about 60 percent less to heat than a comparable house.

“It looks and feels like any other house in the neighborhood. But it acts differently in terms of its energy bills,” he said.

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