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THE GREEN ISSUE

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Eco-friendly homes move into mainstream

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By **Charisse Jones**, USA TODAY

The new houses that will line a rural tract in suburban New Jersey will have walls insulated by blue jeans. In Dallas-Fort Worth, a starter home will come equipped with a computer-controlled vent that pulls in fresh air.

The "green" movement that has spurred schools to discourage paper lunch bags and motorists to trade in gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles for hybrids is creeping into the housing market as a growing number of builders construct environmentally friendly homes and state and local governments offer incentives to create such communities.

"You're beginning to see critical mass, beginning to see it not just be a niche," says Calli Schmidt, director of environmental communications for the National Association of Home Builders, a group of more than 800 state and local home building organizations. "It's pretty much the future of building."

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"We're starting to see a greater focus on incentivizing green residential building," says Jason Hartke of the U.S. Green Building Council, a collective based in Washington, D.C. The council's guidelines for environmentally friendly buildings are the industry standard. "When you think about the idea that 40% of our carbon emissions in the U.S. comes from buildings, and about half of that is residential, we've got to address all our building types."

The council's standards, known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), previously applied to commercial buildings. A rating system for homes will be unveiled this month.

Currently, 500 builders participate in LEED for Homes' pilot phase and roughly 10,000 homes are being constructed to meet the organization's standards, says Emily Mitchell, the program's assistant manager, "so we've seen exponential growth in those program numbers over the last two years."

Local governments sign on

Some cities where green home building is taking hold:

- In Cincinnati**, residents won't pay city property taxes for 15 years on homes that are built or rehabilitated to LEED standards.



By David Kennedy for USA TODAY
Matt Belcher, president of Belcher Homes, stands near some of the environmentally friendly homes his company has built in Kirkwood, Mo.

"We have been looking at all kinds of ways to encourage green design ... and getting people to pay attention to conservation efforts. This is a really good way to get people to incorporate some of these design standards as they're building or remodeling dwellings," Mayor Mark Mallory says of the program, which started last week.

•**In Dallas-Fort Worth**, McGuyer Home builders, which builds about 800 single-family homes a year in the area, now will build all new residences according to criteria set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Dallas Home Builders Association.

Under its "ecosmart program," new homes, ranging from starter houses selling for \$120,000 to million-dollar residences, will include features such as denser filters for air conditioning ducts and programmable thermostats to conserve energy, McGuyer Division President Steven Hayes says.

•**In Wood River, Ill.**, ground will be broken this week for a development that will include roughly 150 single-family homes built to green guidelines set by the National Association of Home Builders. Vegetation will be planted in the community to help clean rainwater and slow its runoff, eliminating the need for storm drains.

Matt Belcher, whose company is managing the Wood River development, built his first community of green single-family homes this year in the St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood. The community's houses were arranged so most windows faced south, making the best use of solar heating and cooling.

•**In Bernards Township, N.J.**, a dozen homes are being planned to blend into the surrounding rural environment.

Paints and glues used in the homes won't have the usual smell because they won't contain chemicals known as volatile organic compounds, says developer Anthony Sblendorio, president of Back To Nature Ecological Design and Development.

The play area on the 89-acre site will use recycled tree logs and stumps instead of the rubber found in jungle gyms. Recycled cotton — mostly from blue jeans — will be used for home insulation.

The development, whose home prices are expected to start at \$3 million, also will have a wetlands area to treat storm water. "We're not just focusing on limiting damage to the environment and building green homes," Sblendorio says. "How do we design so there's increased soil health, increased biodiversity, increased habitat?"

"The town is very receptive," town engineer Peter Messina says. "This township is a suburban community that's clinging to its history of agriculture. ... Almost every development is getting greener, but this is going above and beyond what another subdivision would do."

Levittown, N.Y., renowned as the nation's first suburb, is launching an effort this month that will offer discounts and low-cost financing to enable residents to buy energy-efficient appliances for their homes. "Easy environmentalism is what we call it," Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi says.

Cost is an issue

Building green can be more expensive, some developers say. While home buyers may recoup the extra cost through savings on energy and water bills, steeper price tags for design or special appliances may put off some builders, Hayes says.

For a growing number of homeowners, however, green features are a necessity. "That was absolutely important for my family and for having my kids grow up in a healthy environment," says Maren Engelmohr, whose family moved in July into one of the five homes that make up the Kirkwood development. Hundreds have visited her home to see an example of a green residential structure, she says.

About 80 local green home building programs have been created across the USA, and organizations ranging from the EPA to the Green Building Council are establishing ratings and guidelines for eco-friendly homes, making such construction more accessible, Hayes says.

"People say they want to be green, but are you going to have a home built in a side of a mountain with a sod roof?" Hayes says. "There had to be a compromise somewhere between what's 'far out there green' and what we can get in the marketplace (so) that people can have a home that's attractive but still environmentally responsible."