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## **Going Green: Builders' Efforts to Integrate Eco-Friendly Elements in Homes Benefit Buyers Now and in the Future**

New home ownership kindles enthusiasm and excitement as a buyer prepares to move into a recently completed home. It's easy to anticipate the enjoyment of the pristine elements – new appliances, gleaming floors and counters, freshly painted walls and trim.

But, for many new home buyers in 2008, across the Bay Area and into the Central Valley, there will be additional excitement about features that are not so visible – but very important to the operation and enjoyment of the new home.

Green features – from energy-saving insulation and modern heating and cooling systems to paints and finishes that emit fewer gases and fumes – are becoming standard in an increasing number of new home communities. Along with tankless water heaters and, in some cases, solar panels, builders throughout Northern California are taking robust strides toward moving the housing industry to the forefront of energy conservation and smart building practices.

“Green building is all about ‘building a home right,’” noted Katie Ramp, an independent green consultant who is involved in the homebuilding industry. It goes beyond adding energy-efficient features to a home, focusing as well on jobsite recycling practices to reduce the amount of waste during construction. It also means landscaping that utilizes native plants, which require less water.

“Many green features are things you can't see in a home,” added Ramp, from use of wood from sustainable forests as well as engineered wood, to better insulation and non-toxic paints. “You can't see toxics from paints or carpets or adhesives, but they can harm you,” she said. Many builders are steering away from toxic materials, all for the benefit of the buyers.

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Beyond a safer environment, homeowners will enjoy having a home, which is low maintenance as well as durable. Imagine the resale value of a home in a few years, which is so much “smarter” or “safer” than older homes, said Ramp.

### **Home builders association steps forward**

Earlier this year, the Home Builders Association of Northern California (HBANC), which counts 100 home builders among its 1,000 members, unveiled an ambitious goal; reduce overall energy consumption in all new homes by 50 percent from 1990 levels by the year 2020 and reduce carbon emissions by 30 percent from 1990 levels in the same time frame.

Partnering with Build It Green, an independent organization that has created a Green Point Rated program, HBANC is setting the bar for homebuilding practices throughout the region. Promoting a variety of eco-friendly building practices, Build It Green’s rating system gives point values to various green practices and features, so builders can select practices and materials, set a point-goal for a specific project, and then be judged or rated according to that point system.

Started in Berkeley in 2003, Build It Green has been working with cities and counties in the nine-county region, educating and informing their representatives of the need for building green as well as the benefits to everyone.

Of the partnership between HBANC and Build It Green, Joseph Perkin’s HBANC’s president, explained, “Build It Green’s program exceeds the state’s current standards for energy-efficient construction, is compatible with other national green building programs and is specifically tailored to Bay Area’s unique housing marketplace.”

“We are a unique area. Build It Green is Northern California-based and has lots of understanding about this area’s environmental needs,” added Cheryl O’Connor, 2008 Chair of HBANC. “They brought all the stakeholders together – builders, contractors and environmental experts.”

Brian Gitt, executive director of Build It Green, added, “Together, we can help the Bay Area and California reach the broader goals of dramatically reducing our energy consumption, lowering our carbon emissions and growing our clean tech economy.”

**Next step: Educating home buyers**

With about 15,000 new home permits expected to be issued in this region in 2008, and an additional 15,000 to 20,000 annually for the next several years, the HBANC/BIG program will positively impact thousands of home buyers.

That means builders need to educate these consumers on the green features – seen and unseen – and the value of integrating those features into homes – for advantages in environmental health as well as in energy savings.

“I want a healthier environment for my kids,” is a phrase consumers say when questioned about their desires in a new home, according to O’Connor, who is also vice president of sales for SummerHill Homes, based in Palo Alto. “People used to not attend to energy issues, but the tide has changed.”

Low VOC paints, better insulation and stronger air filters are all elements that are becoming standard in new homes, noted O’Connor. And with increased numbers of children with asthma, for example, many of these features make sense to new home buyers. (VOC is the acronym for volatile organic compounds that easily vaporize and can pollute the environment.)

“Green Home building is constantly evolving,” noted Tony Bosowski, Olson Company president. “It’s certainly not a fad, and the opportunities are constantly expanding. We are continually looking for new products and practices” to make homes more energy efficient and sustainable.

He added, “Buyers have the desire for these practices and products.”

Olson Company recently opened Village Walk, a San Lorenzo community of two-story townhomes, and Bosowski reports that buyers select the development because “they want to be close to work and play and are interested in a project that does reduce their carbon footprint.”

The builder focuses on infill developments, “and the green features are a logical extension” of making the homes appealing to these kinds of buyers. Photovoltaic cells have been installed on each unit and will directly reduce each home’s energy bill. In addition, the company has installed tankless water heaters, uses low VOC paints and performs sealed duct testing and participates in the LEED certification system (a program that follows U.S. Green Building Council standards).

Village Walk is the second Olson development in California to use solar panels.

Warmington Homes, currently selling units in its Palo Alto community of Vantage, also includes photovoltaic panels to produce solar energy, plus tankless water heaters. The builder has also begun offering monthly seminars to educate consumers about the benefits of green building, according to Mark Rowson, division president.

To help consumers feel more comfortable with these features, Warmington is updating their homeowners' manuals to include information about the benefits and operation of these energy-efficient elements. Each unit has its own meter to show the amount of power being generated, for example, and consumers can learn how to read and interpret that information.

Coming soon, Warmington's Grand Marina in Alameda – a collection of 44 single-family units due to be ready by the fourth quarter of 2008 – will be constructed with engineered wood, recycled flyash components in concrete and formaldehyde-free insulation and wood products, all benefits that will help the homes earn a high LEED rating.

Rowson noted that lighting controls and Energy Star appliances will become standard in “all of our projects going forward.”

He added, “Warmington is pushing hard to educate buyers and to integrate these features in the future.” He believes tankless water heaters and dual-flush toilets will eventually become standard in new-home construction, particularly in California. We're probably among the top states in addressing this need (for energy-efficient components).”

Home shoppers will also find a solar component on homes at Oliveta, Centex's new development in San Ramon's Windermere area. The nearly 100 detached homes also have tankless water heaters and upgraded insulation.

“Buyers are starting to become more knowledgeable” about energy-savings features, noted Brian Kennedy, Centex product development manager. “A lot of consumers that visit Oliveta already know about the value of these features.”

Katia Kamanger, senior vice president with SummerHill Homes, noted that the company formed

a Green Building Task Force to formalize a policy and outline techniques that would help the builder set and meet energy goals as well as building code requirements now being formulated by cities, counties and the state.

A current SummerHill project, Park Wood in San Jose, is getting lots of consumer interest. The builder uses engineered lumber “as much as possible,” with the result that there’s up to 50 percent savings in use of wood fiber, Kamanger said. They are also focusing on “tight building practices” to assure that ducts, windows and insulation provide the optimum energy savings. “We do a blower test on each home to determine if there are any leaks,” she said. The company also uses low-VOC paint, hot water recirculation systems, Energy Star-rated dishwashers and programmable heating systems.

On the outside of the homes, the company carefully maps out water-efficient landscaping, grouping plants with similar water requirements together for the best savings of water. They also limit use of grass throughout the development of over 200 homes and condominiums.

Consumers are interest in smart energy and environmental practices, said Kamanger. “I’m finding that many of these features that we’ve explained to focus groups (are appreciated by consumers). They say they want to protect the environment but can’t always articulate what that means.”

Among ways SummerHill is helping educate consumers is by training its sales force to explain the benefits of green building practices and features. The company is also preparing a glossary of environmental terms and features.

As HBANC and its member builders continue to add more sustainable building elements and keep a focus on energy savings, customers will benefit. Today’s homes are becoming more luxurious but more efficient, making them more appealing than ever. And the more informed buyers are about green home features, the more they’ll come to expect builders to provide such sensible and responsible innovations.