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Green homebuilding goes big

For many, the term green-built conjures up the image of a boxy bungalow that has sacrificed luxury and curb appeal for a lower carbon footprint and smaller utility bills.

Throw that image right out of a well-insulated, LOW-E window.

Chris Miles of GreenCraft Builders is constructing a 4,700-square-foot home in Colleyville that will use solar energy and geothermal wells for heating and cooling. The utility bill will be about \$150 a month instead of probably close to \$1,000 in a conventional home.

Newport Homebuilders, like several other larger builders, promises 20 to 25 percent lower utility and water bills in 4,000- and 5,000-square-foot homes.

A zero-energy home in Frisco, built by AndersonSargent Custom Builder for the 2004 Homebuilders Association of Greater Dallas' Parade of Homes, has 3,800 square feet of living space.

But few builders come close to the ambitious project by David Bell and Sandy Tabacinic, business partners at D&A Fine Homes. They are building a 14,000-square-foot home in Addison that they believe will be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) level home.

LEED certification provides independent verification that a home or building meets the highest green-building and performance measures. It sets high stan-

dards and certifies that a home will cost less to operate, produce less waste to be hauled to landfills, conserve energy and water and provide a healthier environment for residents.

The utility bill for a home the size D&A Fine Homes is building would normally run \$3,500 to \$4,000 a month. Because of several new technologies, including special insulation on the walls and roof and a 19-SEER Carrier Infinity heating and cooling system, the five-bedroom, nine-bath home will consume about \$1,000 a month in electricity, which includes powering its 11 plasma TVs, a large media room and nine refrigerators.

"It is much more difficult to achieve LEED certification at this size and luxury," Mr. Bell says.

D&A, which has been building homes for four years, was looking for a niche in the competitive luxury custom homebuilding market. Mr. Bell and Ms. Tabacinic toured several green-built homes and decided that D&A Fine Homes could build energy-efficient, green homes — even at the size and luxury their clients wanted.

It took a year of research and planning for this home. One of the challenges was that the owner, Chuck Butler, founding managing partner of the merchant bank Palomino Capital, was willing to spend the money upfront to buy the additional energy-saving features — but he wanted a fast return on his investment.

Mr. Bell promised Mr. Butler that his investment of \$75,000 in additional energy-saving features would be repaid in about two years.

D&A's purchasing department, he

says, persuaded suppliers to bring their best prices in return for demonstrating that a large, luxury home can be energy efficient and have relatively affordable utility bills.

The house is designed so that every energy-saving component work together through the home management computer and the Category-6 wiring throughout the house.

While Mr.

Bell is excited about the home he has under construction, he gazes fondly across the street at his next project — another 14,000-square-foot home that will be a zero-energy home, powered by geothermal wells and new concentrated solar-energy panels. Mr. Bell plans for it to be certified as a LEED platinum-level home.

To reach that level, Mr. Bell says he is headed back to

the drawing board to learn about the latest technologies.

"To do it [green homebuilding] at this level," he says, "you have to be passionate."

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Sandy Tabacinic and David Bell, business partners in D&A Fine Homes, are building a 14,000-square-foot home in Addison that they believe will be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) level home.

Photo by Aeneas Ford