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GREEN

Home builders, owners put forth extra effort to protect environment

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"Green" products aren't always showy — think recycled paper or burlap grocery sacks — but a northeast Visalia housing development puts its environment-friendly features front and center.

Sierra Ventana, off Highway 198 near Lovers Lane, boasts solar panels, dual-pane windows and other energy-saving elements. Homeowners also have the option of water-saving "California landscapes" showcasing rocks and hardy desert plants.

But the solar panels have the biggest effect, said Pam Lockhart, real estate broker for the subdivision.

"If you take a whole development and put these panels on every house," she said, "then it's the equivalent of just planting acres and acres of trees."

Sierra Ventana can't claim to be unique, however. "Green" construction is catching on everywhere.

The future of home building

Home builders are under no obligation to create green neighborhoods — yet. Bob Keenan, president of the Kings/Tulare County Home Builder Association, said such requirements aren't far off.

In the meantime, the association has affiliated itself with the California Green Builder program. The organization provides flexible guidelines allowing builders to attain green certification.

The state Legislature is looking at industry regulations that would use the California Green Builder program as a guideline, Keenan said. But smart builders are staying ahead of the curve, he said.

"The consumer is becoming more aware of their environment and they're looking for [green features]," he said.

There's plenty of evidence backing him up.

The Tulare development Claremont Greens, built by certified-green builder Pacific Union Homes, already has sold out, according to the builder's Web site.

A green Fresno neighborhood recently sold its lots before building even began, said Shawn Ogletree, natural resources conservation manager for the city of Visalia.

Visalia is working on a green-building program that would reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, be more energy-efficient and conserve water, Ogletree said.

"I think everybody is kind of starting to realize it's a market," he said.

Visalia's program would not be mandatory. But it would dovetail with green-building efforts by the home-builder association and the United States Green Building Council.

Builders can go to the council with questions on building green, said employee and environmental planner Emily Magill.

"[Making a difference] is really a lot of little things," she said. "It doesn't have to be one thing that's big, because they all add up."

Government goes green

Cities also are going green. The two newest Visalia Police Department precincts used an array of green features, including tightly compressed hay bales as insulation and enhanced natural lighting.

The hay bales serve a dual green purpose, said Visalia's Assistant City Manager Mike Olmos. Not only do they provide extra insulation that cuts down on the use of energy, but hay is an easily renewable resource.

Olmos said he's a big fan of using natural light.

"You almost swear when you walk underneath [a skylight] that there's a bulb in there, but there's not," he said. "Natural lighting just makes people feel good."

The buildings also were oriented with the environment in mind. The urinals are waterless. Bamboo is used for wainscoting.

"Nobody could figure that it was grass and not wood. It looks a lot like oak," said Dennis Lehman, city building official. "And it's a very renewable source. It looks very rich."

A new police headquarters for Visalia also will have green features, Lehman said.

Finding them doesn't have to add a lot to the cost, he said.

"You have to be smart and selective," Lehman said. "It may not be readily apparent, but if you search around, the products are pretty much out there."
