

NEWS

Builders like 'green,' but say it's more expensive

Trends swing toward being more environmentally friendly

By Beth Potter
Mountaineer Staff Writer

More builders in Eagle County say they want to "build green" — mainly by using energy-saving measures in homes and commercial buildings.

But they also say it's more expensive — adding 2 percent to as much as 40 percent or more to the cost of a building.

For example, the \$2 million Snowmass golf course club house, built in 2003, includes an expensive geothermal heating system and other energy-related upgrades, says Tim Carpenter, pre-construction director at R.A. Nelson and Associates in Avon.

But increased building costs are expected to be recouped in 10 years in lower heat bills, Carpenter said.

"It pays back for itself relatively quickly," Carpenter said. "They want something that's going to be cost-effective over the term of the building."

Geothermal heating usually isn't considered to be cost-effective in houses because it's so expensive to install compared to how much energy it can save, Carpenter said.

County has Eco-Build rules

Builder's opinions could play a big role in Vail's latest plans to add a green building code to its existing development rules, Community Development Director George Ruther has said.

In general, speculative builders don't like to follow such rules very much, because they pay their own building costs up front, Ruther pointed out. Custom builders usually are more open to such rules, he said.

Eagle County has a slate of "green" Eco-Build rules; other communities in the region have discussed adopting them, including Avon.

Kevin Mowder, co-owner of CHC Mountain Structures in Eagle thinks the Eco-Build rules may be common sense, but builders have to be open-minded to potential savings.

"People look at it as a penalty and it's not supposed to be," Mowder said. "You complain, then you say, 'Oh wow. With good insulation, I'll recoup that in the next two years.'"

Builders like the dollars and cents approach, Carpenter said.

"If you do this, it will save you that, is becoming more and more prevalent," Carpenter said. "I think the buzz is starting to change with the mentality of the people

Science School to be environmental showcase

When the new Gore Range Natural Science School is constructed in Avon, builders plan to get a top environmentally friendly rating.

To get the national LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating, designers have gone all out to make every part of the campus be an environmental showcase. LEED is an industry standard put together by the U.S. Green Building Council, a non-profit group.

Architects have designed several smaller buildings rather than one big building and situated them to take advantage of solar heating in colder months and cooling air currents in summer months. Straw bale insulation is planned.

Environmental systems in the building are integrated into the design, said Brian Sipes, architect and principal at Zehren and Associates, the architectural firm in Avon working on the project. The firm is collaborating with architect firm Mithun in Seattle.

Building contractor R.A. Nelson of Avon, will even have to document its recycling efforts on the site. The school has raised at least \$6 million of the estimated \$9 million needed to build the campus. When builders start is contingent on how much money is raised.

A paradigm shift

"Most of the features are not going to jump out at you," Sipes said of the new campus. "It's a paradigm shift — not a normal building with features added on."

A LEED-platinum rating, the highest LEED standard, may add as much as 40 percent to the cost of a project, Sipes said.

"From airlocks to bathrooms, every piece of it is as environmentally sensitive as possible," Sipes said. "We want to show people that environmentally sensitive design doesn't have to look weird."

LEED is quickly becoming a buzzword for new buildings in the county. The Westin Riverfront Resort & Spa in Avon bills itself as on track to be the largest LEED-certified project in the county to date. Traer Creek Plaza in Avon was another LEED project.

Vail Resorts' plans for an estimated \$1 billion new ski portal called Ever Vail in West Lionshead also plans to go for the top LEED rating.

LEED approval is given to buildings after they are finished. Requirements include things like energy-saving appliances and more insulation.

who build spec homes. That's a good thing."

Going for "glitz"

But since speculative builders often won't be around to see any benefits of building in energy savings, they

tend to go for more "glitz" items, Carpenter said.

"It's an issue we run into all the time. Spec builders aren't going to own the building, they're not going to operate the building, so they're not as concerned about systems that save energy," Carpenter said.

Custom builders often have an easier time of it, since they can get their clients on board from the beginning, which can save money, said Brian Sipes, an architect and principal at Zehren and Associates in Avon.

"I tell clients — if you design a normal building and add LEED (a "green" industry standard) at the end, it can be expensive," Sipes said. "But if it's a goal at the very beginning of the design, it really shouldn't be that hard."

County employees are careful to explain how the Eco-Build regulations can help builders, said Adam Palmer, the county planner who handles the environmental regulations.

A sensitive issue

"Any time you're increasing regulation or providing another layer, obviously it's a sensitive issue for somebody whose livelihood is dependent on it," Palmer said. "Typically, we don't like to be told what to do, right?"

The Eco-Build code is "points-based", meaning builders can choose items they want to do to get the points required to get their projects approved.

"It definitely pushed the building community a bit, in a good way," Palmer said. "So high-efficiency heating systems are more standard where they weren't necessarily so, before."

Probably the most controversial piece of the Eco-Build rules govern new heated driveways and patios, Palmer said. A builder who puts in any external heating has to offer a renewable energy project on site or pay into a separate Eco-Build fund, he said.



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That fund collected about \$160,000 per year in the last few years. Last year, the money paid for 35 residential solar systems and a Habitat for Humanity project, which helps lower-income residents become homeowners.

"A snowmelt driveway is pretty much three boilers to run the snowmelt system and one to run the house, so you're just pushing on a rope," Palmer said. "Our message is you can still do that, just realize it has an impact. So as long as that impact is mitigated, I guess it's acceptable."

Other "green" building rules often include requirements to install energy-saving appliances, add glazing to windows and require higher insulation standards.