

The Salt Lake Tribune

Southern Utah developer builds zero-energy houses

By Mark Havnes
The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 03/09/2008 06:55:12 PM MDT

Posted: 6:45 PM- ST. GEORGE - A Southern Utah developer is building zero-energy houses - homes he believes will offset utility bills and give cash back to owners over the years.

Aaron Needham, with sponsorships from General Electric and JP Morgan Chase Bank, is building the houses in Ivins and Washington City, as well as in Midway.

His company, Needham Homes and Development, has been building energy-efficient houses for two years in Cedar City. Recently, he had his renewable-energy-credit building program certified by an independent consultant.

"We now have documentation that will guarantee lower utility bills," Needham said.

Kevin Emerson, with Utah Clean Energy, described the builder's concept as "unique and innovative."

Clean Energy is a 6-year-old, nonprofit that works with Utah residents and government agencies to educate and advocate for energy-efficient policies.

"[Needham] is definitely breaking new ground," said Emerson. "Other builders in Utah are building zero-energy houses, but nothing like [Needham's] model.

"He is working with some impressive partners, especially Building America that gives him the measure of verification he needs."

Needham said the energy-efficient homes are not subject to negative forces currently influencing the real-estate market in states other than Utah. That, he said, makes them attractive to build. The homes range in price from \$200,000 to \$500,000.

"The reason people are not building homes now is because a lot of them [in markets elsewhere] are worth less the day you finish them than the day you started," Needham said. "Our homes are appreciating - not depreciating."

Needham said owners of his homes can expect to see a reduction of 70 percent in utility bills.

Such savings are achieved through construction methods that pay attention to sealing exterior doors and windows, installing special insulation and using energy-efficient appliances, furnaces and air conditioners.

The houses also use wind and solar power for generating electricity and heating. And they provide renewable-energy credits.

A credit is equal to a single megawatt of

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electricity produced by the homeowner through solar panels or wind generator.

The homeowner will be paid up to \$500 a year by a program that will then broker the credits to offset the carbon footprint of another person or company.

Other ways the homeowner will save are through federal and state tax credits, Needham said.

And when buying the house through JP Morgan Chase Bank - Needham's preferred lender - up to 9 percent of the home's sales price will go toward a reduced down payment, a lower interest rate and offset six months of the first year's mortgage payment.

Needham said while the concept of energy-efficient construction is not new, his claims can be quantified and verified according to independent research.

That research was done by Consol, a Stockton, Calif., firm that manages the Building America program for the U.S. Department of Energy.

Abe Cubano, a research engineer for the company, said he has evaluated and authenticated Needham's efforts, saying they are in line with federal standards. He believes the green builder is the nation's first to bring different elements such as financing constructing, brokering renewable energy credits and appraising together in a single package.

"He's done all the legwork, and it's amazing what he has done," said Cubano "[Needham's] homes produce something. They create a residual income. No one else in the nation is doing this."

Cubano said Utah is a good place for such a program to lay its foundation because it does not have the bureaucratic hoops to jump through like California., pointing out that the Beehive State's housing market is healthier than other parts of the country and more conducive to Needham's innovative ideas.

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