

Richmond Green Builder Targets Budget-Minded Buyers

National Green Building Standard-certified house is affordable to working-class customers.

By Jennifer Goodman
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A Richmond, Va., builder has put a new spin on the American dream by offering a home that is not only affordable to working-class buyers, but third-party-certified green as well.

The Henrico County house is one of the country's first homes for entry-level buyers certified by the **National Green Building Standard**. Priced at \$209,950—only a few thousand dollars more than nearby homes--the 1,452-square-foot farmhouse-style dwelling packs many of the high-performance features normally found in a more expensive dwelling.

Located in the working-class Vaughan Heights neighborhood, the house is affordable to local middle-class workers such as teachers, firemen, and nurses, says builder John Nolde, CEO of First Richmond Associates. By being sustainable as well as attainable to this group, it fills a niche between high-end, custom homes and subsidized public housing.



Built by First Richmond Associates on an infill lot in Henrico County, Va., the three-bedroom, affordably priced home was recently certified Bronze under the National Green Building Standard. *Credit: Courtesy First Richmond Associates*

“When we first looked into this project, we realized that there was no workforce housing in the Richmond area that had been certified green,” says Nolde.

The three-bedroom house, located less than 15 minutes from downtown Richmond, includes a range of energy-efficient and water-saving features such as a TechShield radiant barrier, blown cellulose insulation, Energy Star-rated lighting and appliances, low-flow toilets and showerheads, efficient plumbing runs of 30 feet or less, and low-E windows. It received Bronze certification from the National Green Building Standard on Sept. 14.

DUE DILIGENCE

The project was conceived last year, after Nolde and First Richmond president Susan Hadder received their Certified Green Professional designation from the NAHB and decided they were ready to build their first sustainable house.

At the same time, the Richmond area was reeling from high fuel prices and the duo noticed that interest in energy-efficient homes had skyrocketed. With years of experience building workforce housing in the area, they also realized that energy-efficient housing for this segment was almost non-existent.

After months of research, Nolde and Hadder decided that the market for affordable green housing in their county is strong, despite the weak economy. Over the next few years, they hope to develop 14 similar dwellings on their infill property, each on small 0.15-acre lots.

“After a lot of research, we think there is a market for this,” Nolde says. “We’re about to find out.”

They drew up preliminary design ideas and met with a verifier familiar with the ANSI standard to make sure they were on the right track.

“We found it really helpful to pick his brain a couple of times before construction started,” Nolde says. “He was full of information and suggestions.”

AFFORDABLE PRODUCTS

Once the design was nailed down, Hadder searched for lower-priced interior products that would meet Green Building Standard requirements. She was able to spec eco-friendly carpeting and pads, recycled-vinyl floors, Energy Star-rated lighting fixtures, and sustainable hardwood without going over budget.

“I was hesitant at first to look for affordable products because I wanted it to look good, too,” she says. “It was easier than I imagined to find attractive, affordable green products.”

Nevertheless, Hadder realized many manufacturers aren’t familiar with the special requirements of building a third-party-certified house.

“We had to educate subcontractors and in some cases get new suppliers,” she says. “The products are pretty much available, it’s just trying to get them and making it work with the budget.”

For example, she says it took six weeks to get information about a floor covering’s environmental attributes because the sales rep wasn’t familiar with it. “It was a learning curve not only for us but the suppliers and manufacturers as to what people are looking for in these types of products,” she says.

On the other hand, some suppliers surprised Nolde with their knowledge of affordable green products. Employees at his lumberyard, Richmond’s **Stock Building Supply**, were especially helpful.

“When I told them I wanted to get a radiant barrier, they had their **LP** guy on the phone in 30 minutes,” he says. “The sales rep came out and met with my crew and showed them how to install their product. I have to pat that guy on the back.”

BUYER EDUCATION

Now that the house is complete, Hadder is concentrating on how to market it. She realizes that some entry-level or first-time buyers may not be aware of the benefits of a third-party-certified dwelling, she says.

“Most anybody knows what Energy Star is, so they’ll see that with the appliances, Hadder says. “We plan to show them other things they may not readily see as green, such as the floor coverings, lighting fixtures, windows, and insulation.”

Nolde thinks that once customers see the potential savings of living in a high-performance house--up to a 22% reduction in monthly energy bills--they will not balk at paying a bit extra. Similar non-sustainable homes in the neighborhood are priced at about \$205,000.

“With the financial market the way it is and with so much sensitivity to people’s credit, we’re hoping people are willing to pay a little more for a green house and see that it will save them money in the long run,” he says.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION

Even though they could have saved money by not having the house third-party verified, the pair say that certification is too important to cut from the budget.

“Without the certification, you could say that ‘green techniques’ were used in the project, but if you’re going to go to the time and expense to build the house, let’s have somebody else certify it and say it’s truly green,” Nolde says.

Building a certified home was something new for Nolde, a 39-year veteran of the industry, but he downplays the extra work that went into the project.

“The finished home doesn’t seem a lot different from other homes I’ve built, but the process of building it was different,” he says. “The thing is that a lot of these requirements will soon be part of the building code so you’re not doing anything too out of the ordinary in a lot of areas.”

He realizes that making a living by building workforce housing is not the path many green builders would choose to take.

“In today’s market, it’s going to be a difficult thing to get into the lower price level,” he says. “But there are people in every price range that appreciate the benefits of a green home.”

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