

ENERGY CHECK

'Smart developments' can save needed energy

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By Ken Sheinkopf

Q: In view of the rising gasoline prices and the higher costs of commuting to work, it seems obvious to me that the country needs more planned communities with not just energy-efficient homes, but which put just about everything a homeowner needs in close proximity. Why don't we see more of these developments?

A: Actually, I think there are more opportunities to live in places like this around the country than you realize. I did a search on the Internet and found literally hundreds of places all over the country that are using efficiency and renewables to help make the communities sustainable, affordable and comfortable while minimizing the need to drive far from home. There probably is a fairly new development just like this somewhere in your state.

While this type of community has been around for at least 25 years, I think it's only in recent years with the tremendous increase in both driving costs and surging home utility bills that have stimulated the huge growth going on today. It's essentially a reaction to the urban sprawl that surged after World War II with the moves from the cities to the suburbs, and it's now bringing people back to the old "main street" feel of living in the center of everything.

For example, a good example of this type of development is a community I found called Oshara Village in New Mexico. They have a range of homes there in a wide variety of sizes and prices, with buyers able to select Energy Star appliances, passive solar home orientation, super-insulation, wood-burning stoves, solar water heater and other features that can cut energy bills in half. There's even an option for easy installation if the buyer wants to add a solar electric system later. In addition, a non-profit organization studied the anticipated driving patterns of people who lived and worked in the village, and concluded they would use 61 percent less energy for driving than would normally be used, resulting in both significant energy savings as well as a huge reduction in a village family's carbon footprint. The village even encourages residents to work from home to further cut down on the costs of driving and time spent commuting.

Hundreds of other developments around the country offer similar benefits and designs and share the general philosophy of efficient homes and close-by services and community features. Homes in developments like this one (also called traditional neighborhood developments), which are built in suburbs but have the benefits of the convenience of living in a city center, usually feature passive solar homes that use considerable less energy than standard homes do, while minimizing the need to drive because you're within walking distance of the town center. You can live in a place like this and enjoy the benefits of an energy-efficient home while greatly reducing the need (and cost) to drive to work, shopping, school, restaurants and many other services, using pedestrian-friendly paths and bike trails instead.

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