

New program prompting Build San Antonio Green to grow

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In the two and a half years since the Build San Antonio Green program got off the ground, only a handful of homes have been built under the initiative.

But since introducing a less intensive program earlier this year, interest in the program from volume builders -- as well as the general public -- has heated up.

"It's truly a market transformation as we speak," says Michael Lopez, coordinator of the Build San Antonio Green program for the Metropolitan Partnership for Energy (MPE). "We have never been busier than the last six to eight months here at MPE."

Indeed, 68 builders are now part of the Build San Antonio Green program, compared with 32 last year.

A joint venture between MPE and the Greater San Antonio Builders Association (GSABA), the program is designed for the South Texas climate and encourages builders to use its energy efficient and environmentally friendly materials. The program allows builders to earn points, which could result in incentives such as waiving fees for permits.

Last month, MPE announced that three builders certified under the program committed to build a total of 1,000 homes over the next year. The builders are Imagine Homes, Neighborhood Housing Services, and the San Antonio Alternative Housing Corp., the latter two being providers of affordable housing.

In addition, MPE officials expect that other tract builders will sign onto the program in upcoming weeks.

Builder friendly

Anita Ledbetter, who was executive director for Solar San Antonio before taking over the reins at MPE in February, says the organization originally touted a more intensive green building program. While the program is still available, over the years it produced little interest because of the high cost involved.

"It was kind of a custom job because there was so much to do," she recalls. Indeed, high-end custom builder Todd Glowka was the first San Antonio builder to complete a home under the program.

"Our flagship program ... a more intensive program, produced three certified homes in (less than) three years," Ledbetter continues. "Meanwhile, there were tens of thousands of homes being built."

"We wanted to target the production builders," she adds.

Called "Quik Qual," the new program introduced earlier this year has more builders interested in signing up.

Kimberly Kapavik Shrum, government affairs director for the GSABA, says both the new program and the flagship program encompassed five areas -- materials, health, energy, site development and water conservation. However, the flagship program allowed a homeowner to build anywhere from a Level 1 home to a Level 5 home -- the Level 5 home involving the maximum number of environmentally friendly and energy saving measures.

While the newer program offers builders a checklist that allows them to only meet Level 1 standards in each category, Kapavik Shrum says most of the homes built in the original program were actually Level 1 or Level 2. The problem, she contends, was the original program was complicated and confusing, and required more extensive documentation. "It was just not conducive to the homebuilding process," she says. "It was not user-friendly."

Indeed, some homebuilders may have been actually utilizing qualifying materials and techniques, but declined to participate in the program because of the work involved.

Like the older program, Quik Qual encourages builders to use paint with low or no volatile organic compounds (VOC) emissions as well as buying energy efficient appliances. Materials are also evaluated for their durability and environmental impact. However, builders are provided a simple checklist that offers points on a scorecard that could result in tax credits and other incentives.

Ledbetter says Build San Antonio Green is also working hard to educate builders about products and techniques that are not only environmentally friendly, but also save construction time. For example, the Structural Insulated Panel (SIP) Association reports that tests show that SIP walls are more energy efficient than the traditional stick-built walls. Ledbetter adds that the process of putting up SIP panels is quicker than the stick-built method, reducing time and labor costs.

"Our strategy with the volume builders is to explain things in a manner that's real," she says.

Build San Antonio Green

What is it: Joint venture between Greater San Antonio Builders Association and the Metropolitan Partnership for Energy to encourage builders to construct energy efficient environmentally friendly homes.

Cost of certification: \$100 for GSABA members; fee is shared between GSABA and MPE

Web site: www.buildsagreen.org

