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Builders warming up to green construction

Irvine Co. pledges its homes will meet city standards for efficiency

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More than a year after the city created a voluntary green-building program developers are working with the guidelines in their residential developments.

Now, the Irvine Co. has pledged to have all future residences green-certified through the city.

The guidelines provide a menu of options for builders, including rooftop solar panels, bamboo flooring, formaldehyde-free cabinets and drought-resistant plants.

The first residential project looking for the green light is the Irvine Co.'s Woodbury East. The project of 761 residences will include low-flow showerheads, water-based wood finishes and tankless water heaters.

All of the Woodbury East residences are expected to meet the city's minimum level of green certification. One neighborhood, built by California Pacific Homes, will go for the higher "plus" certification level.

Mike LeBlanc, spokesman for the Irvine Co., said that residents in that development, and the company's future green villages, will also each receive brochures explaining "Green Living."

"This is just a continuum of the importance we've placed on stewardship of the environment," LeBlanc said.

With the Irvine Co. pledging to go green, and Lennar Corp.'s pledge to do the same with its homes around the Great Park, what's left is the Irvine Business Complex.

No projects have yet applied to be green certified in the 2,670-acre area near John Wayne Airport.

The city is negotiating with the developers in Irvine Business Complex to match the standards to the products. Neither the apartment nor single-family house standards apply to the condos and town homes being built there.

"There are some features (of the program) we've had to fine tune," said Shawn Thompson, the city's energy programs administrator. "We want to work with the builders to make this as easy as possible."

She already has worked through questions and issues raised by John Laing Homes – modifying the program to provide guidelines for condos and town homes.

And the city continues to work with Starpointe Ventures on the program. The company is a consultant to most of the residential developers in the Irvine Business Complex.

Starpointe's Vice President Patrick Strader says the program is moving the building industry in the right direction of conserving energy. But, he is working with the city on finding ways to continue building luxury products while following the program. His concern is that materials such as paints, carpeting, flooring and faucets need to both be good for the environment and be of high enough quality for higher-end buyers.

Strader said he is looking at the program with his developer clients. A softening housing market, he said, will not make it any easier for builders to afford going green.

"Green building needs to be looked at with a careful eye more so now than when the market was strong," he said.

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