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Claverack hosts NY's first passive house

The future of energy-efficient housing starts here

By Francesca Olsen
Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

Published:
Sunday, January 23, 2011 2:07 AM EST

CLAVERRACK -- Tucked away on 7 acres in Claverack, the state's first certified passive house sits, quietly and unobtrusively, invisible from the road, glinting in the winter sunshine.

The 1,650 square-foot, three bedroom home is just days away from completion — crews from the Chatham-based Bill Stratton Building Company have been working on it for the last seven months.

The house is many things at once: a highly energy-efficient structure designed by architect Dennis Wedlick, who maintains offices in New York and Hudson, a showroom for brand new, green products from companies like General Electric, Philips and Mitsubishi, the 11th certified passive house in the United States, and a welcoming, sunny and open dwelling with high ceilings and thoughtful storage spaces.

While a few other passive buildings are being constructed in the state, this one is the first to be completed.

Passive house does not mean passive solar, Wedlick explained. While passive solar "puts more focus on the sun," passive "puts more focus on the entire envelope to reduce the amount of energy you need to heat and cool."

About 90 percent less energy, in fact. Similarly sized homes cost around \$3,000 a year in energy costs, said Wedlick. This one will probably cost \$450 in energy costs per year. That includes heat and electric.

It's superinsulated which prevents the transfer of heat outside. A wall of windows that retain solar heat makes up the south side of the house, and a heat recovery ventilator helps recover heat from the warmed air inside and transfers it to the new air coming in from the outside; it does the opposite in the summer.

Air is constantly circulating — fresh air is pulled in, stale air is pulled out, and the majority of the heat is retained in the process. A filter keeps it clean and allergy-free. The construction is airtight and draft-free, even with the constant change of air.

"It's more about the quality than anything else," Wedlick said. "Unless it's built right it won't work."

It's actually around four times tighter than Wedlick expected it would be. The crew ran a test, hooking up a fan to the front door to see how much air leaks out per hour. A regular house would change air six times an hour. They were expecting the passive house to have a transfer of air .6 times in an hour; it's built so tightly that in an hour, only .15 of the air transferred out.

There's no hot water tank — an electronic box with temperature controls heats the water as it's used, which means you never run out of hot water when you shower and



New York State's first certified passive house is days away from being completed in Claverack. The 1,650 square-foot, three bedroom home represents a possible future in energy-efficient structure design. According to its designer, the house would cost around \$450 a year in energy expenditures, including heat and electric, compared to the \$3,000 or so it costs for a similarly-sized traditional home. (Francesca Olsen/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

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water to the toilet, which means you never run out of hot water when you shower and you can run the dishwasher and the shower at the same time. The kitchen, bathrooms and washer/dryer are all clustered into the center of the house (not all in the same room, of course), so water doesn't need to move through pipes more than is necessary.

The products inside are also energy-efficient. Some were given to the project before they were made available to the public, including LED lights by Philips that line the kitchen/living area, and a compact GE washer/dryer that is vent-free. Part of the house was paid for by a NYSEDA grant for all the building science and technology work, including computer modeling.

Nick Ford, who has led the building crew during most of the house's construction, learned how all the technology worked step-by-step.

"I knew I was going to be building a super-airtight structure," he said. "I educated myself really quickly right after the frame raising, so I could know the principles behind it and know what I had to achieve."

"This whole project is so well thought out. It's totally going to revolutionize the whole building industry," he continued. "Nothing's wasted."

The asking price is \$595,000.

"There has been some interest on the real estate side," said Stratton. "There's been a lot of interest in the methodology and the whole passive technique."

The house's website (www.thegoodhome.com) gets hundreds of hits a day, Wedlick said, and there have been plenty of requests for tours and interviews — during construction, a group of students from the City University of New York took an educational tour as well.

For more information e-mail hudsonpassiveproject@denniswedlick.com, or visit www.thegoodhome.com.

To reach reporter Francesca Olsen call 518-828-1616, ext. 2272, or e-mail folsen@registerstar.com.

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Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of registerstar.com.

jdeere wrote on Jan 23, 2011 8:12 AM

"How would a local family of four live here? They certainly are going to look for something a little bigger and with that price tag locals can't afford it. I guess this goes along with the flex fuel cars that they want us to buy but we don't have the gas stations to fill up at. More progress without real solutions!"

JoeyCrash2 wrote on Jan 25, 2011 2:00 PM

"Agreed jdeere. Even a slightly high-priced home for a family of four in this area is priced in the \$200,000 to \$250,000 range with a reasonable slice of land. So you supposedly save \$2,500 / year on heat and electricity — even if absolutely nothing needed maintenance it would still take you about 135 years to make up the difference. And how much gas/electricity are you likely to spend to tend to that 7 acres of land? Not to mention the taxes on such a relatively large piece of property."

nf wrote on Jan 25, 2011 6:31 PM

"This type of construction can be applied to any structure. New or existing. Within any reasonable budget. All the bells and whistles are not necessary."

Reid Fleming wrote on Jan 29, 2011 10:14 AM

"NF- Absolutely correct. What people have to do is unthink. There are plenty of low tech solutions to saving energy. You don't need to have all the bells and whistles to get by. Look at straw bale houses (timber frame) with bales as insulation and not load-bearing. You have an R value of at least 50. Combine that with the benefits of passive and active solar heating, an efficient hydronic heating system or even an efficient woodstove and you can build a home which could be heated and cooled for a lot less than a conventional home. You would need a lot of money to build the house in the article, or a whole lot less to build a similarly efficient but not as fancy home which works as well."

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