

Luxury builders hope solar sells

Condominium developers in Phoenix are hoping a promise of five years of free electricity will help convince home buyers to plunk down about a million dollars each for 36 energy-efficient luxury townhouses they are developing.

Catalyst Communities is building green townhouses at its Aura at Camelback development that include 4-kilowatt photovoltaic solar electric systems on each home. The rooftop systems should generate 80 percent to 100 percent of the electricity a home needs, but Catalyst is agreeing to pay any electric bills residents receive for buying additional power from the local utility for the first five years.

The homes also are designed to receive silver certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, program.

Catalyst Communities believes its homes will attract buyers who conscientiously strive to minimize their energy consumption, which makes the free electricity offer possible, said Chad Gifford, president and founder of Catalyst Communities.

"Living a life in balance requires intelligent environmental design and socially responsible choices," Gifford said.

For most buyers, the concept of buying a luxury home while also respecting the Earth's resources is a new concept, he said.

The townhouses range in size from 2,469 square feet to 3,147 square feet and the prices range from \$900,000 to \$1.3 million. The development is in a shopping and entertainment district in central Phoenix, Gifford said.

The green building philosophy has been around in North America for more than a decade, but it's beginning to gain in popularity as costs come down, energy prices go up, and consumers become more aware of global warming and environmental concerns.

"We're seeing a lot of these sorts of projects going up throughout the country," said Ashley Katz, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes sustainable building practices and administers the LEED program.

Katz said this is the first project she has heard of in which the developers promise to pay the costs of electricity for home buyers. However, concerns about electric bills frequently motivate home buyers to look at green structures, she said.

In addition to installing solar electric systems, the developers plan to offer vehicle-free streets within the complex and private underground parking for residents. Each unit, with as many as five levels of living space, will have a rooftop garden and its own private elevator. Water use will be minimized with the installation of low-flow fixtures, and energy-efficient appliances also are standard.

The lack of streets and pavement helps reduce the "heat island" effect that is a problem throughout Phoenix, Gifford said. He added that the condos are close to movie theaters, stores and restaurants, so residents will be able to walk most places.

The homes are attracting buyers who are aware of issues including the environment, global warming and energy conservation, he said.

"We've had people who drive Priuses, which is understandable," Gifford said. "But they're really about the overall lifestyle shift."

Work crews break ground this spring and expect to finish construction by mid-2009.