

Buckeye Verrado house is at leading edge of growing energy-saving trend

by [Catherine Reagor](#) - Jun. 27, 2011 12:00 AM
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Bruce and Kerry Ploeser were shopping for a new home. The couple and their four children lived in the West Valley but needed a smaller place because their in-laws were moving out and one kid was starting college.

The Ploesers have a friend who works at Meritage Homes, and he persuaded them to come out and look at the company's new "green" houses in Buckeye's Verrado community.

"We went into the sales center, and there were all these cool exhibits showing exactly how the houses were built more **environmentally friendly**," said Bruce, a restaurant owner. "And each exhibit showed how much we could save on our utility bills."

The Ploesers found a 3,400-square-foot home they loved for \$250,000 and decided to buy it. But by then, Bruce, an Air Force veteran, wanted to know more about the green-building techniques and see if they could incorporate even more energy-saving materials in their home.

He talked to the company's environmental-building expert, who had long wanted to try to create a "net-zero home" but hadn't come across the right buyer.

Net zero means a building uses no energy except what it receives from solar panels and other environmentally friendly building techniques.

"The plan sounded radical," Bruce said. "But the chance to cut our electric bill to almost nothing and do the right thing for the **environment** sounded great."

Hundreds of much more expensive net-zero custom homes have already been built in the country, but until now, they were cost-prohibitive for the typical buyer.

Meritage and the Ploesers built the house they planned. Now, they believe it is the first net-zero home in Arizona.

Building green

The trend toward incorporating more environmental features in homes and office buildings has grown during the past few decades. But most buyers still weren't willing to pay the extra money for a green building.

Recent surveys by the National Association of Home Builders and consulting groups show green building is becoming more

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popular among buyers than other amenities like golf courses, parks and larger homes.

But those surveys haven't translated to buyers' actual decisions until lately.

For the past few years, homebuilders have had to compete with a glut of cheap foreclosure homes in metro Phoenix. Many of those homes were built in recent years and have plenty of upgrades, making them stiff competition for newly built homes.

That competition plus the recession left most homebuilders buckling.

Scottsdale-based Meritage took a write-down on the value of its land, downsized its home plans and did away with upgrades like granite countertops to keep prices low enough to compete with foreclosure homes. It worked, and the builder survived and eked out a small profit.

Then it found a new niche: green houses that save owners on utility bills.

Every home that Meritage builds now in Florida, Texas, Arizona and California comes with an environmental package, and the builder's chairman, Steve Hilton, said buyers aren't being charged any more for it.

"Home buyers can cut their average electric bills from \$200 in a regular home to \$100 a month in one of our new homes," he said.

Showing off green

To interest more buyers in green homes, Meritage realized it needed to explain how what it was building would save people money.

The builder's new sales centers look like deconstructed houses. Bright signs point out green-building techniques and give estimates of how much money each one can save a homeowner.

In the kitchen, a sign explains only Energy Star appliances are installed. They use 10 to 50 percent less energy than other appliances.

The ceiling is open to expose the "air sealed" insulation that is supposed to be 200 percent more energy efficient than regular insulation. A yellow sign points to a light fixture and tells potential buyers that at least 80 percent of all lighting in the home is fluorescent, which uses 75 percent less energy and produces less heat. The toilets are outfitted with dual-flush activators that consume 75 percent less water.

Everything from the wood studs in the wall to the water heater and plumbing is also displayed, with signs explaining how each feature saves energy and money for the buyer.

"Meritage's new sales offices are like environmental-education centers," said

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national housing analyst Tim Sullivan with the Irvine, Calif.-based John Burns Real Estate Consulting. "It's fascinating. A production builder has finally been able to build true green homes and explain them to buyers."

Meritage has sold more than 200 of its green homes in the several states where it operates.

Outfitting a home with the material Meritage is using for its green houses would typically cost \$50,000, homebuilding analysts say.

Hilton said Meritage is able to avoid raising the cost of a home by purchasing the materials in bulk at lower prices.

Net-zero home

The Ploesers' attractive brown stucco and stone home looks like any other house on the block, unless you go around the back and see some of the 25 solar panels attached to it.

Net-zero homes generate energy through solar panels and other methods to "bank" the power with utilities. Homeowners use more power from the electric supplier in the summer when bills are higher, and they feed the solar power they generate back to the utility at other times. Essentially the homes operate solely on the energy they produce.

Because the amount of power generated depends on the seasons and the weather, a net-zero house typically takes a year to produce enough energy to offset the electric bills.

The Ploesers moved in to their home on Earth Day, April 22.

Bruce said that last month, they used the washer and dryer during peak times at midday and kept their air-conditioning at 76 degrees. His electric bill was \$90, but he expects it will be \$15 next summer. It won't be zero because he still has to pay the basic maintenance fees required by utilities.

Green trend grows

More production builders are incorporating money-saving green building into their plans. Beazer Homes offers upgrades for tankless water heaters, dual-flush toilets, recyclable carpet and more-efficient air-conditioners.

Del Webb/Pulte's green home additions include high-efficiency vinyl windows, water-saving showers and toilets, and more-efficient insulation. Joseph Carl Homes come with a solar-power system that generates electricity and heats water.

"Everyone talks about green homes. It's cool, like when everyone bragged about buying a Prius," said Jay Butler, director of realty studies at Arizona State University. "Now homebuyers are most concerned about getting the most for their money. So if they

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can get a green house for a good price, builders might sell some more of the homes."

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