

Homeowners Go

Green

By **Brittany Brady**

These days, the term “green house” has a whole new meaning. But what does it take to have an environmentally friendly home? With this new buzzword, many homeowners are wondering if you need the green to go green.

Waco ranks No. 161 in Sperling’s BestPlaces and Country Homes’ “2008 Best Green Cities in America.” C’mon, Waco. We know we’re no environmental connoisseurs, like Austin (No. 33 on the list), but we’re lagging behind Dallas (No. 94) and even El Paso (No. 156). We have more to learn.

Most Wacoans may not know of a green home-building market in the Waco area, according to Brad Alford of Alford Construction and first vice president of the Heart of Texas Builders Association.

“It is costly [to build green],” Alford said. “But it also just depends on how green you want it.” Alford recently built a completely green home. From wood windows to foam insulation to wiring made of recyclable materials, nothing was left out.

“Theoretically, she shouldn’t have an energy bill,” Alford said. The house, approximately 3,180 square feet, would normally cost about \$370,000 but the homeowner paid approximately \$800,000. “She probably won’t see the return on that either ... unless she lives to be 180.”

Immediate changes to consider include lighting, water heaters and appliances. Larger changes include windows, foam insulation, solar panels, environmental flooring and countertops, as well as air conditioning and heating units.

“The thing to look at with your AC is the S.E.E.R (Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio) rating,” Alford said. “A normal rating would be a 14; a more energy efficient unit would be a 21. It can do the same thing with less power.”

Certain alterations can yield a quicker return. Your energy company can offer a variety of products and services to help lower your next bill. Austin Energy

revealed that on average, a fluorescent light bulb would save \$50 in electricity costs over its life.

To take that one step further, the United States Senate discovered that the use of energy-efficient light bulbs would reduce the country’s emissions by \$18 billion annually. The new bulbs would be 70 percent more efficient and last six to 10 times longer than old ones. Homeowners who want larger changes may not recoup the cost if they only plan on staying in their homes for two to three years. Alford recommends seven years or more to see a return.

Currently, the city of Waco offers no incentives, rebates or tax breaks for building a green home or making green modifications to an existing home. In comparison, Austin offers rebates and other incentives for everything from changing light bulbs to changing the kind of toilet you use.

“It is frustrating, but the reason they have incentives in cities like Austin is because they offer city-owned utility companies, where we have private,” said Don Dameron, owner of Aztec Solar in Waco. “Although Waco doesn’t offer anything, I

do know there are 69 bills pending in the Texas government relating to solar and energy efficiency. A month ago there were only 33.”

The poor condition of the economy has been at the front of American minds for the past year. Unemployment is rising. The stock market is falling. People are working hard to keep their heads above water and their bank accounts out of the red.

President Barack Obama, in an online public address, said, “The size and scale of this problem demand unprecedented efforts to root out waste, inefficiency and unnecessary spending.”

In response to this economic crisis, Obama signed into law the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, previously known as the federal economic stimulus bill. The act is intended to raise energy efficiency standards while providing extra funding for homeowners to make necessary changes.

“I spend 99 percent of my time educating about

solar (energy). Anything you can run off electricity, you can run off solar [energy]. I’ve even talked a few people into waiting on solar panels because they might get some money back,” Dameron said.

Kay Vinzant, director of the Heart of Texas Builders Association, said Waco’s lack of help to builders looking to build green has been frustrating. She also said builders are “getting ready for change” with Obama’s new act. Those in the green industry are optimistic about the grant money that could be available for homeowners looking to be more energy efficient.

“It’s all there in the bill. The next step is funding,” Vinzant said. She said Rep. Jim Dunnam (D-Texas) is currently working on increasing funding for this project. “We know it’s coming. We don’t know how soon, but we know it’s coming” she said. Vinzant says if all legislation passes smoothly, she hopes to see it go into effect Sept. 1, 2009.

Jenny Casey, chief of staff for Dunnam, said, “It’s up to the states to request money for programs. Governor (Rick) Perry has been hesitant to request funds that are more than just a one-time gift.” However, Casey said, “There are ways for legislature to accept funding without the approval of the governor.”

Dunnam, chairman of the House Select Committee on Federal Economic Stabilization Funding, issued a statement to Texans on the Texas Stimulus Fund Web site. “While Members of the Texas House did not have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of the stimulus, it is our obligation to ensure that the funds are spent with accountability and transparency,” he said. “We cannot waste tax dollars, or miss the opportunity to make this one-time source of funds work for Texans.”

If no action is taken, the fear is that this money will



Solar electricity requires no moving parts, substantially decreasing maintenance requirements and increasing reliability and long equipment life.

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be accepted by other states.

Weatherization funding is also a big issue in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, Casey said. Weatherization, or the practice of protecting a building and its interior from weather damage and modifying a building to reduce energy consumption and optimize energy efficiency, is one way to force homeowners to conform to the 2009 energy standards and make their homes more energy efficient.

The act would provide additional funding for homeowners to weatherize their homes.

“While we don’t have any real power to accept funding on behalf of certain committees, we have heard from the State Conservation Committee and others who are making steps toward acceptance,” Casey said. “We hope to continue to push them to contest for and accept additional funds.”

Design by **Jordan Lloyd**
Photo courtesy of **Aztec Solar**

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- Kay Vinzant,
Director of Heart of Texas
Builders Association