

Tucson Habitat builds LEED certified homes

By Gretel Hakanson

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Founded in 1980, Tucson Habitat for Humanity has raised more than 1,200 walls, built more than 300 homes, engaged more than 4,000 volunteers and helped hundreds of families achieve the dream of homeownership. Now Tucson Habitat is incorporating green building practices into its projects.

The reasoning is twofold, according to Deputy Director Danny Knee. “One is to make the homes more energy efficient and thereby reducing the operating costs for our low-income families. Any amount that we can reduce their operating costs – energy, water and other utilities – is money that they can spend on other expenses in life,” he says.

Secondly, Habitat values conservation. “We believe that, especially here in the desert, we should be aware of the resources that we’re taking to build these homes and whatever we can do, whatever techniques we can implement that lessens the strain on those resources. It’s a complimentary ideal of ours to go with the idea of ending poverty housing,” Knee says.

Tucson Habitat also builds all of its homes to local and national green building standards. For example, all of the homes are TEP Guaranteed. “We make sure that the houses are air-tight and they’re not losing heated air in winter or cooled air in summer,” says Knee. “There’s a preferred electric rate that our homeowners get because of the TEP guarantee program.”

All homes also comply with Energy Star standards, which is a requirement of the Tucson Habitat’s parent organization, national Habitat for Humanity and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires it as well. Additionally, Tucson Habitat now builds all homes to the Silver rating of either the Pima County Regional Residential Green Building Program or the City of Tucson’s Residential Green Building Program, depending on the home’s location.

“One of the things that we love – and love to give a little of love to – is the city and the county,” Knee says. “Their residential green programs are free for us and they’re more specific to our geographic area [unlike some national programs]. They focus more on water and cooling and not as much on heating.”

One of Tucson Habitat’s future homes will also be aiming for LEED certification, a first for the organization. “We have a big building day, called Building Freedom Day, where we start multiple homes,” says Knee. This year we’ll start eight homes and one of those homes will be going for LEED certification.”

Tucson Habitat was awarded a grant from the county to offset some of the additional

WHY HABITAT IS SO GREEN

Green is not new to Habitat for Humanity Tucson. They have been integrating sustainable design into their building practices for several years. In fact, some even say that Habitat Tucson is leading the way in our community for green building.

Habitat Tucson homes were the first to earn certificates from the City of Tucson and Pima County’s new green building programs. Last year, four Habitat homes earned the first silver certificates from Pima County and four more earned gold this year.

In addition to recycling construction materials such as lumber, copper and cardboard at each site, Habitat Tucson also uses products containing low or no CFCs and VOCs, and landscapes with organic fertilizer.

Habitat Tucson earns “Innovation Points” for many practices already in place on the build site. Some of these include Habitat’s use of volunteer “people” power, which decreases the use of generators and other power tools and decreases noise pollution. Habitat encourages volunteers to carpool to the sites saving on gas and air pollution. Through a partnership with Air Fresh Environmental, Habitat Tucson also pre-treats lumber with a mold preventer in order to improve indoor air quality.

More recently, Habitat Tucson has partnered with Watershed Management Group to train several volunteers on the use of water harvesting and gray water. A test home,



PHOTO: Hailey Thoman, Habitat Volunteer Program Coordinator

Toni Laxague (left) and Glenda Leader (right), volunteers with Tucson Habitat’s Women Build project in May, pounded nails and raised walls while they worked on the Pottenger family’s future home in Marana.

costs associated with LEED certification. Even if Tucson Habitat doesn’t continue to seek LEED certification, Knee says the organization will continue to build to LEED standards. “It’s not that important for us to have the piece of paper. We want to get one certified to confirm that we’re meeting those standards and from there, we’ll continue to build to those specifications,” he says.

But Tucson Habitat is careful to remain true to its mission. “We are always happy to do things that are sustainable and save energy but we always have to balance it out with our mission to provide home ownership opportunities for low-income families,” Knee says.

Based on data from the Pima County Regional Residential Building Program, Tucson Habitat homes save on average approximately 20 to 30 percent on water and electricity use compared to homes built to the minimum building code.

Green building practices and certification don’t guarantee efficiency, however. The homeowner has a lot to do with energy savings – their lifestyle choices along with how they operate the home. Tucson Habitat realizes this and offers homeowner training.

“We have education courses for all of our homeowners. One of those is a green class, which includes tips on saving energy,” Knee says. “As part of those programs we hand out a handbook to every one of our homeowners that tells them how they can save energy, describes all of things in their homes that are energy and water saving.”

Speaking of water saving, water harvest-

ing is now standard for all Tucson Habitat homes. In fact, two employees are certified through Watershed Management Group’s water harvesting certification program. The water harvesting techniques employed are primarily of the passive variety – using earth-

works, berms and swales, to direct water to native landscaping. “We’ve had incredible excitement around water harvesting. We had 200 volunteers that showed interest in doing water harvesting, which was pretty interesting,” Knee says. Since then Habitat Tucson has trained 50 people on water harvesting techniques and continues to offer weekend workshops for volunteers.

In addition to providing homes for low-income families, spreading the gospel of green is important to Tucson Habitat. “What’s great about some of the green stuff that we do is we have the ability to educate – even if only in some small way,” Knee says. “People actually get to see first-hand, hands-on, the green technologies out there and what they can do.”

“We have this idea of making [green] part of community conscious,” says Knee. “That’s in our mission and when we talk about ending poverty housing, in the same way, it helps promote sustainable development and sustainable practices by having people come in touch with it first hand.”

Still, some people believe green building and increased costs go hand and hand. But according to Knee, not the green practices that Tucson Habitat employs. “A lot of the green building practices don’t actually cost more. There are some places where it can save you money. You just have to implement the systems to do so. Sometimes it just takes a little more work.”

“There is a conscious effort that we want to be leaders in the nonprofit community [in terms of both] affordable housing development along with green technology,” Knee says. “We’d like to push people to understand that you can still do it affordably.”

Hundreds of local families have benefitted from Tucson Habitat’s work but the organization also walks the talk when it comes to green practices.

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

RESOURCES

Tucson Habitat for Humanity’s Building Freedom Day takes place annually on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Since 2002, volunteers, donors and sponsors have joined together to begin construction on several new homes. If you would like to volunteer to help this worthy cause, or for more information, visit online: www.habitattucson.org.

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