

# Courier News

BUILDING GREEN *in* CENTRAL JERSEY

## Eco-friendly homes are new Tewksbury luxury

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By STEFANIE MATTESON  
Staff Writer

TEWKSBURY -- Green is now more than just a paint color for prospective buyers of luxury real estate in this upscale Hunterdon County community.

The township is the site of the state's first "green" or eco-friendly luxury residential development, an exclusive enclave of four multimillion-dollar homes that are intended to improve, not deplete, the health and vitality of soils, groundwater and plant and wildlife habitat through innovative design.



STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID BERGELAND

*Landscape architect Anthony Sblendorio and his 2-year-old son Anthony walk toward the covered bridge that leads to the site of a new eco-friendly luxury residential development in Tewksbury.*

The development, Fern Valley, is the lifelong dream of landscape architect Anthony Sblendorio. He is the principal of Back to Nature Landscape Associates, an Oldwick-based landscape architecture firm that employs 40 people and has been promoting natural landscaping for more than 11 years.

He said his motivation stemmed from growing up in the nation's most densely populated state in one of its most densely populated suburbs. Bergen County's Waldwick, made up predominantly of modest houses on small lots, is situated on a highway -- Route 17 -- for which the term "strip development" might have been invented.

Though the green building movement is taking off, with green schools -- such as Gladstone's Willow School -- and green commercial buildings no longer uncommon, green housing developments are still unusual because a developer's instinct is to stay with the tried and true rather than going out on a limb.

"Nobody likes to be the first," said Athena Sarafides, research scientist at the state Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Sustainable Communities and Innovative Technology, who called Fern Valley unique in the state.

The National Association of Home Builders reports that green houses still comprise less than one percent of the nation's total, but that number is on the rise. Between 1990 and 2001, about 19,000 houses were certified as "green" by various state and national programs, compared to about 13,000 in 2002 alone.

"Green building is becoming mainstreamed very fast," said Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow with the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute. "It no longer conjures up images of geodesic domes and rammed-earth cabins."

And the increase is expected to accelerate as a result of new Model Green Home Building Guidelines by the National Association of Home Builders.

"Our mission is to develop guidelines usable by mainstream developers that are of interest to mainstream buyers," said Rich Dooley, an association land-use planner and environmental analyst who helped draw up the guidelines.

The development of green certification standards for residences by the U.S. Green Building Council is also expected to boost green housing construction. The council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification is now the gold standard for green commercial and government buildings.



**Artist renderings (above & below) illustrate what home developers have created in Tewksbury: the state's first eco-friendly luxury residential development.**



Sblendorio's aim is simple: demonstrate that it is possible to build a residential development that gives to the land more than it takes.

"It's frustrating to try to convince others to do this without it having been done before," he said. "The best way to show it could be done was to do it ourselves."

More than two years in the planning, the "ecologically inspired neighborhood," as Sblendorio calls it, features four houses on lots ranging in size from 3 to 7 acres. The houses are on a site in which the choicest property -- the 8.3 acres along a trout stream with two ponds -- has been set aside as communal open land.

From a development standpoint, the Boulder Hill Road site is a difficult one: heavily forested, with steep slopes and wetlands. But that is part of its appeal. Sblendorio said he wanted to demonstrate that a green development could be built under conditions that do not meet the ideal of flat, open farmland.

An unbuilt 6,134-square-foot spec house -- a 13-room farmstead-style structure with clapboard siding and a cedar-shingled roof -- is now on the market for \$2.3 million. Customers can buy the other lots -- starting at \$595,000 -- and bring in their own designers and builders or work with Sblendorio's team to create their dream house.

With prices stalling in the luxury price range according to the Otteau Report, which monitors the state's real estate industry, being green also gives a developer a competitive edge. Interest has been high among prospective buyers, says listing agent Glory-Ann Drazinak of Weichert, Realtors. She said she receives two or three inquiries a week -- a level unusual at that price.

The response shouldn't be a surprise. Nationally, eight of 10 home buyers say that conventional new houses do not meet their demand for green features, McMahon said.

"My fear is that we won't have enough lots," Drazinakis said.

And though Sblendorio is on the cutting edge, conventional builders may find that if they, too, don't start incorporating elements of green building practices and strategies into their designs, they are going to be left in the dust, said Mark Biedron, co-founder of Willow School.

"The green building movement is gaining momentum, and it's poised to take off big time," he said. "It's something that's not going to go away."

In New Jersey, the Department of Community Affairs' Green Homes Office, created in 2000, has the most comprehensive affordable green homes program in the country, said spokesman E.J. Miranda. The office encourages the use of green technologies through technical and financial assistance and advocacy and education programs.

Though the price of house lots in Tewksbury -- where minimum lot sizes are large -- dictates that developers build large, expensive homes, Sblendorio denies that there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of an ecologically friendly 6,000-square-foot house with five bedrooms and a four-car garage.

"The building footprint isn't the same as the ecological footprint," he said. "A small house can destroy the environment, and a large house can be constructed ecologically and be married to the land."

As an example, he pointed out a new house of average size on Old Turnpike Road. The sloping lot had been bulldozed to create a level space for the house, which looked as if it "had been dropped onto the site by a helicopter" rather than being situated to preserve the trees and the natural features of the topography.

Using innovative design, green houses are also energy efficient, a saving that appeals to prospective buyers, he said. Energy-saving features typical of such houses include sensors that dim the lights or turn them off, super-insulated roofs and windows and natural heating and cooling.

A reduction in energy costs in green buildings ranging from 20 to 50 percent is not uncommon, McMahon said.

"People are beginning to look at a 10,000- or 15,000-square-foot house built the same old way, with no environmental considerations, as a waste," Biedron said. "They're thinking quality instead of quantity, efficiency instead of waste."

## WHAT YOU GET FOR \$2.3 MILLION

Prospective buyers of a 6,134-square foot luxury green home on a 4.7-acre lot – or even armchair buyers – might wonder what features they get for their \$2.3 million.

Included the traditional and eco-friendly home features are:

- 13 rooms, 5 bedrooms, 5 full baths and ½ bath
- 4 car garage
- 640-square-foot unfinished in-law or au pair area above garage
- 1,788-square-foot unfinished lower level
- Energy-saving lighting, heating and cooling features
- Enhanced indoor air quality
- Access to 8.3 acres of communal open space, with a trout stream and two ponds
- Neighborhood walking and bridle trails
- Water harvesting system for irrigation
- Landscaping maintenance services
- Soil cement dirt roads that are harder than asphalt
- Roadsides planted with wetland swales and pools to purify stormwater
- Outdoor education programs for children
- Optional services such as stocking the kitchen with groceries, planting garden containers and filling vases with fresh flowers

And despite its size, a large house can contribute to the renewal of natural resources through such means as rain water harvesting for irrigation as well as landscaping with native plants that allow storm water to penetrate the ground instead of lawns that promote storm-water runoff.

"The idea is to recharge the local aquifer, rather than shooting the water runoff (from roads, driveways and other impervious surfaces) off site through curbs and storm drains," Biedron said.

The issue of groundwater recharge is an important one in Tewksbury, which is on impermeable pre-Cambrian rock whose fissures, into which storm water seeps, are vulnerable to depletion. To discourage runoff, the Township Committee recently voted to curb development by increasing the already-large minimum lot sizes.

Other features that increase groundwater recharge include encouraging the growth of deep-rooted trees, such as oaks, that break up the subsoil, and creating pocket wetlands with plants such as cattails and sedges. Combined with basins beneath the surface, these purify storm water before it enters the aquifer, Sblendorio said.

These ecological features are a selling point, but an even greater selling point is that the houses offer greater value than competitively-priced houses through what Drazinakis called "value engineering."

Sblendorio and his team will work with a prospective purchaser to design and build a house "holistically" from start to finish. For instance, instead of calling in the excavator once to dig the foundation, again for the pool and a third time for the landscaping, the work can be done all at once, saving on costs.

Moreover, customers get a house that is perfectly suited to their needs rather than a house that may have features they don't want or lack those they do. For instance, Sblendorio said he is working with a prospective buyer who is an avid chef to incorporate a kitchen and an herb garden into the landscape design.

Plans even call for post-construction concierge services: for a fee, Back to Nature will stock the kitchen with groceries, plant garden containers, fill vases with fresh flowers, split firewood or pick up dry cleaning.

Then there is the appeal of the development itself. The wooded enclave -- located in the rolling foothills of the New Jersey highlands -- offers both privacy and a sense of community. The name comes from the many fern glens that dot the rocky, wooded slopes of the valley through which the stream flows.

To ensure that the architecture of the houses is consistent with the site and with the other houses, the deeds will contain covenants requiring that the designs pass an architectural review.

The sense of community is symbolized by the covered bridge at the entrance -- the first to be built in the state since the 1870s -- and by the trails that will link the houses to one another and to the community, Sblendorio said. The bridge is also symbolic of a sense of place: the 250-year old township and its historic hamlets.

"It's important that we start to build new structures inspired by the historic things that we love," Sblendorio said.

Sblendorio also views the bridge and trails as links to the future. In keeping with that vision, his plan for Fern Valley even includes outdoor workshops for the children of residents to explore the natural environment, with the aim of fostering an attitude that promotes future environmental stewardship.

Across the country, visionaries such as Sblendorio are leading the way in green development, McMahon said.

"A small boutique builder will do a project and it will generate so much attention and publicity that the big, traditional builders will take a look and start to model their projects after the smaller one," he said.

It is Sblendorio's vision that Fern Valley will serve as a model, demonstrating that residential development and respect for the environment need not be mutually incompatible.

"Otherwise," said this father of a 2-year-old boy, "our children will be sitting in our place dealing with what we leave behind."

*Stefanie Matteson can be reached at (908) 707-3136 or [smatteson@c-n.com](mailto:smatteson@c-n.com)* For more information on Fern Valley, visit the Web site at [www.fernvalley.net](http://www.fernvalley.net) or contact Glory-Ann Drazinakis at (908) 256-4304