

Energy Star homes arrive in Missoula

By CHELSEA DEWEESE for the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, January 17, 2005



Mark Noon walks down the steps of one of the Energy Star townhouses his company recently built in Missoula. The homes are the first in town to wear the Energy Star label. Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Energy Star products like computer monitors and dishwashers can be found just about everywhere nowadays. But an entire house bearing the Energy Star label?

Yes.

In one more victory in Montanans' long-running war against frigid winter temperatures and rising energy prices, Missoula contractors are beginning to offer houses guaranteed to cost less to keep heated.

Kingdom Builders of Missoula recently finished the first two Energy Star homes ever built in the city, and the company's owners are hoping to start a new trend.

The two Energy Star townhouses look almost like every other townhouse being built in the 2000 block of Kent Street, but Energy Star homeowner Tom Malone will spend \$25 to \$40 per month less than his new neighbors for natural gas and electricity.

That's because the townhouse Malone bought a couple of months ago is almost airtight. And that not only prevents cold air from getting in, but also gives the house an almost-soundproof quality.

The townhouse is Malone's first home. He was sold on it the first time he walked in, shut the door and couldn't hear the jackhammers at work across the street; the silent, controlled air flow inside the house seems space-aged.

And even though Malone hasn't lived in the house long enough yet to have finished unpacking, he's already seeing significant reductions in his utility bills - up to half of what he was paying at his last residence.

That's because the builders painstakingly checked every nook and cranny of the house for leaks before putting it on the market.

Local contractors Mark Noon and Russ Hellem co-own Kingdom Builders. The two men decided to build the Energy Star townhouses on speculation after learning about the program from Hellem's father, who builds Energy Star homes in Wisconsin.

Both men are environmentally conscientious when they build homes anyway, said Noon, so it only made sense to become Energy Star certified. Now their goal is to start incorporating the same energy-efficient building techniques in other homes they build in the city.

Many custom homes have energy-efficient designs that are requested by the homeowners, Noon said, but he wants to make Energy Star houses available for buyers who can't afford to design their own homes.

For a home to be Energy Star certified, it has to meet certain criteria set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy, with the main focus being on reduced air leakage.

Air leakage, the drafts many homeowners experience around their doors and windows, is responsible for 25 to 40 percent of heating and cooling expenses, according to the Energy Star Web site.

Where an average home has a complete air changeover because of leakage approximately 15 times every hour, the new townhouses have just three complete air changeovers an hour.

To make the Missoula townhouses airtight, Kingdom Builders did a number of things. The windows are double-paned and have argon (a safe gas) in-between to reduce the amount of cold air coming through.

The exterior of the home has a spray-on insulation layer - which Noon compared to a truck bed liner - underneath the regular insulation. The builders also paid particular attention to seams on the ceiling and other leakage problem spots.

To finish up, they looked throughout the house with an infrared camera for any leaks they may have missed. The house was then checked, certified and labeled by a representative of the Butte-based National Center for Appropriate Technology.

"Otherwise, it's just your normal house," Noon said.

Just because a house is energy-efficient doesn't mean there are strict restrictions on its design, Noon said. "The program is designed to appeal to the masses."

He emphasized that the comfort of a temperature-controlled home, not just the lower energy expenses, is an important feature of Energy Star homes.

Of course, the cost-cutting aspect doesn't hurt.

The Missoula Energy Star homes cost about 2 percent more to build, Noon said. He said homeowners will recoup the additional cost in energy savings during the first five years or so.

There is also a one-time \$500 tax credit available for people who buy Energy Star homes in Montana right now, he said.

Noon said he and Hellem hope to build more Energy Star homes in the Lewis and Clark neighborhood of Missoula this spring.

"There's this whole new consciousness of this science," he said. "It's just kind of ingrained in how we build now."

The Energy Star Homes Northwest program is a cooperative effort between the Energy Star program and the Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance. NEEA activities and programs in Montana are funded by NorthWestern Energy and nine other western Montana rural electric cooperatives.