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Home Builders Association of Berks County

DECEMBER 2014

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THE GREEN TEAM

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& Inspectors Collaborate
on New Approach for
Energy Efficient Homes



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THE GREEN TEAM



*Builders,
Contractors,
& Inspectors
Collaborate on
New Approach
for Energy
Efficient Homes*

By Mike Arblaster

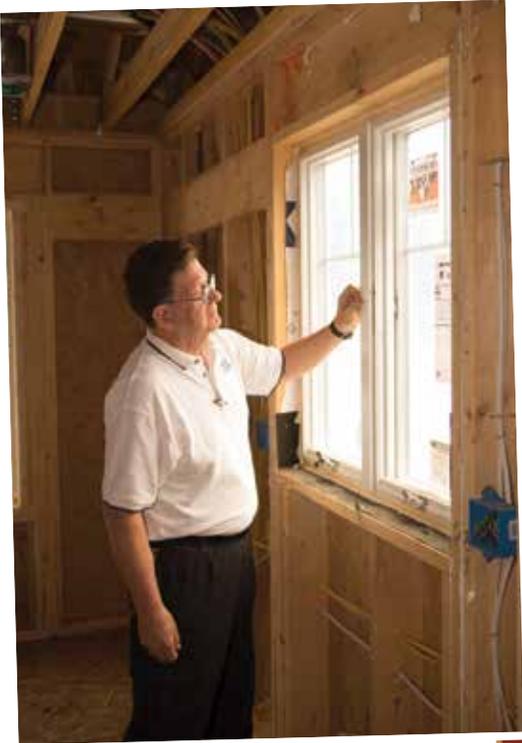
What's the Buzz

Residents of Alden Place at Cornwall, a new retirement community in Lebanon County, chose this location not only for the simplicity of quiet life in the countryside but also for the peace of mind that comes with living in a quality-built, energy-efficient home.

At Alden Place, a team of builders, contractors, and inspectors are designing homes that can, on average, reduce energy costs by 30 percent when compared to typical new homes. The homes feature draft-free construction, high-efficiency heating and cooling equipment, and state-of-the-art water management systems.

As a result, Alden Homes, the developer of Alden Place, can now calculate—and market—potential energy savings for each home. “When I sell homes, I can say with confidence what it’s going to cost to live

“It takes commitment, perseverance, and communication—because the natural response to any change is resistance.”



makes for a very thorough, tight insulation job.”

But, energy efficiency is not only about installing extra insulation; it's about the way the insulation is installed. Alden Homes placed studs 24 inches apart instead of the standard 16 inches. Reducing the number of studs allowed Graybill's crew to increase the amount of space for insulation to be placed within the walls, while maintaining the structural integrity of the buildings.

here. That's a major selling point,” said General Manager James Graybill.

The workmanship found within Alden Place is the product of a unique—but increasingly sought after—expertise in maximizing energy efficiency. Across Pennsylvania, property managers like Graybill are forming partnerships with teams of specialists who can reduce energy costs while improving home performance in terms of quality, comfort and durability.

Better Building Design

In 2009, Alden Homes began building to standards of the ENERGY STAR® program, the same U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) program that promotes efficiency for home appliances.

The first challenge was to design the homes to minimize drafts and environmental exposure. ENERGY STAR estimates that a half-mile of cracks and gaps surround the windows and doors of an average home, allowing cold winter air to creep in and warm air to escape.

Alden Homes eliminated those cracks by sealing the homes and using a new technique that blows fiberglass insulation into the wall cavities and attic space.

“We were very careful to seal the homes before installing the insulation,” Graybill said. “With the blown-in fiberglass, that



Better Heating & Cooling Systems

Ameri-Tec Mechanical, a Narvon-based division of B.J. Baldwin Electric, was chosen to install the heating, ventilation, and cooling (HVAC) systems when Alden Homes began building to ENERGY STAR standards.

Ameri-Tec needed to be credentialed by either Advanced Energy or the Air Conditioning Contractors of America (ACCA), national organizations that partner with ENERGY STAR to train contractors on best practices for equipment sizing and installation to maximize efficiency and comfort.

“There are ENERGY STAR checklists to fill out on every system,” said Rick Steffy, an Ameri-Tec estimator. “But ENERGY STAR certification means you're getting a

better job, a better system...We've learned a lot by doing it.”

The HVAC requirements include guidelines for sealing the ductwork and minimizing air restrictions. Rather than use leaky wall cavities as return-air pathways, Ameri-Tec installed hard metal ducts and sealed the duct fittings by hand.

This extra attention to detail sets Steffy's team apart from the average contractor. According to ENERGY STAR, a house can lose 20 percent of the air moving through its duct system due to leaks, holes and poor connections.

Better Peace of Mind

The final step for Alden Homes was third-party verification from a Home Energy Rater, an inspector trained to identify climate-specific energy saving techniques.

Stan Kuhn, whose company Energy Auditors is based out of Harrisburg, was hired to ensure that Alden Place homes complied with all ENERGY STAR requirements. This process included an on-site inspection to test the insulation, ductwork and HVAC installation, among other measures. “Windows, doors, heating system, we inspect everything,” Kuhn said.

Becoming a Home Energy Rater required Kuhn to be accredited by the Residential Energy Services Network (RESNET), a national standards-making body for energy efficiency certification programs such as ENERGY STAR.

“The job of the Home Energy Rater is to do a proper inspection following the ENERGY STAR checklist,” Kuhn said. “Certain things have to be done in a certain fashion. These are not big, expensive, time-consuming projects: some spray foam here, some caulking there. The key is to be sure everything meets a certain energy efficiency level.”

For example, Kuhn found that Ameri-Tec needed to install a special ventilation system and adjust the duct seals. “Stan is tough,” Steffy said. “He goes through and makes sure everything is correct. If he sees something out of kilter, he'll definitely let us know we're leaking air.”

Continued on page 8

New Program Incentivizes for Efficient Home Construction

Providing the latest in energy efficiency typically results in higher costs for the advanced materials, labor, and additional training involved.

To help offset those costs, in 2011 Graybill was among the first to apply to participate in the Pennsylvania Energy Efficient New Homes Program, an incentive program offered by FirstEnergy's

Pennsylvania utilities: Met-Ed, Penelec, Penn Power, and West Penn Power.

The program offers incentives to builders of new homes that meet ENERGY STAR standards. Each newly built ENERGY STAR home is eligible for a \$400 rebate. In addition, builders receive \$0.10 for each kWh saved annually.

To date, 112 builders across Pennsylvania are participating in the program, with six based in the Berks County area. About 900

HVAC contractors are approved to work on ENERGY STAR homes nationwide, 32 of whom are based in Pennsylvania.

Team Adapts to Evolving Housing Market

ENERGY STAR certification has been a learning process for everyone involved at Alden Place. Adapting to new building practices has not always been simple, Graybill said. But, the transition has led each company to advance their trade, further setting them apart as energy efficiency experts within an industry that remains predominantly wedded to older building techniques.

"It takes commitment, perseverance, and communication—because the natural response to any change is resistance," Graybill said. "But, once you get there, it's easy. Now, ENERGY STAR is just another brick in the foundation of being a solid builder with a quality product."

As more home buyers seek properties that deliver lower utility bills and higher levels of comfort, Kuhn sees energy efficient homes as a necessary step for builders to compete in today's evolving housing market.

"Builders can—for not a whole lot more cost—build a much better home, have fewer call backs, and have much happier customers," Kuhn said. "Will buyers want a house that costs 25 to 30 percent less to heat and cool? Of course, they will." ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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