In the News

Big Builder Bets on Solar

In March, one of the nation's largest home builders announced plans to outfit 1,254 new homes in the Sacramento, Calif., area with photovoltaic power. The agreement between Lennar Homes and the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) represents the largest solar-home development project ever attempted in the United States. Construction is scheduled to start immediately and continue through 2010.

Earlier this year, Lennar revealed that it was building 650 solar-equipped homes in nearby Roseville, Calif.

The photovoltaics for both projects will be supplied by San Jose, Calif.–based SunPower Corp. The systems cost about $20,000 each, but thanks to state tax credits and rebates from local utilities, they'll add only about $10,000 to $12,000 to each home's sales price. Buyers will also be eligible for a one-time federal tax credit of $2,000.

Energy bills for the solar-powered homes in Sacramento — which averages 320 days of sunshine per year — could be as much as 60 percent lower than those for comparable conventionally powered homes, says SMUD. In addition to the solar collectors, the new homes will incorporate such conservation features as attic radiant barriers, extra insulation, efficient hvac appliances, and compact fluorescent lighting.

During hot summer days, SMUD predicts, the completed Sacramento project's peak need for electricity could be almost two megawatts less than that of a conventional development.

The project is also expected to generate far less greenhouse gas than a conventional development, an environmental benefit that SMUD says is comparable to planting 980 acres of trees or taking 620 cars off the road.

Like most big builders, Lennar is awash in red ink and unsold inventories these days; it's even taken the unprecedented step of asking subcontractors for givebacks (*In the News,* 3/07). Nevertheless, the solar venture appears to be a success. Less than three months after breaking ground for the Roseville development, the company reported that 31 homes had already been sold — a sales pace unmatched by any of its other projects. — *Tom O'Brien*

■ After stonewalling for eight years, the Department of Labor has promised to issue a ruling in November requiring employers to provide workers with safety equipment free of charge. This action comes in response to a lawsuit filed by two unions against the federal government in January (*In the News,* 3/07). OSHA, a division of the Labor Department, has been promising since 1999 to clarify an existing statute that requires businesses to "provide" safety equipment without explicitly stating that they must also pay for it.

■ Irwin Industrial Tools is sponsoring a contest to find the "Ultimate Tradesman." As part of its sponsorship of the Nascar Nextel Cup series, the toolmaker is inviting professional tradespeople and DIYers in host cities to visit a participating retailer during race week and compete in a timed "measure, mark, and drill" contest (using Irwin tools, of course). The 30 fastest contestants in each local market will go on to compete against each other in regional events; the grand-prize winner will receive a customized Ford F-150 pickup, plus the chance to win $1.26 million. Details are posted at www.irwinchallenge.com.

■ NAHB and the International Code Council are joining forces to develop the nation's first residential green building code. The announcement was made during a joint news conference at the International Builders' Show in February. The two groups hope to complete the new standards within two years.

■ Nobody can accuse the CEO of the nation's largest home builder of putting a rosy spin on his company's near-term prospects. "I don't want to be too sophisticated here, but '07 is going to suck, all 12 months of the calendar year," said Donald J. Tomnitz of D.R. Horton. He made those remarks in March, while speaking at an investor conference in New York. Tomnitz noted that production was down 35 percent from peak output and predicted that further cuts were likely. He blamed excess inventory for the company's troubles.

■ In Rhode Island, a Superior Court judge has refused a motion for a new trial from three paint manufacturers who were found guilty last year of creating a public nuisance by distributing lead-based paint in the state. Judge Michael Silverstein plans to appoint a "special master" whose job will be to determine how to clean up the state's estimated 250,000 lead-contaminated houses, and how much to charge the paint companies for the work. Those companies, Sherwin-Williams, Millennium Holdings, and NL Industries, plan to appeal the decision to the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

Restoration Show Spotlights Window Repair

Anyone who has worked on old buildings has learned (probably the hard way) that the materials and techniques needed to do the job properly are entirely different from those used for new construction or remodeling. If you're considering restoring — or even adding onto — a structure that predates drywall and plywood, there's no faster way to get up to speed than to attend the Traditional Building Exhibition and Conference.

At one of the conference's demonstrations, contractor Marc Bagala shows how easily paint and glazing compound peel off a window sash that's spent a few minutes inside his invention, the Steam Stripper (partly visible at right).

On the expo floor of the most recent show, held in Boston in March, 200 vendors displayed a cornucopia of restoration materials unlikely to show up at Home Depot: period lighting fixtures, reproduction hardware, and historic tile, doors, millwork, and cabinetry. Some companies offered esoteric products like ornamental metalwork, stone sculptures, and copper roof spires; two exhibited wavy replacement glass for old windows.

The unspoken theme of this year's event seemed to be window repair. Clearly, owners of old buildings have finally gotten the message that their properties are more valuable with the original sash in place. During virtually every moment of the four-day show, someone somewhere was speaking about the hows and whys of saving old windows.

Restoration consultant John Leeke offered an eight-hour hands-on master class on his repair methods. Painting contractor Duffy Hoffman talked about paint removal, epoxy repairs, and the correct way to repaint. Window-repair specialist Jade Mortimer discussed weather-stripping and demonstrated some of the tools of the trade — most impressively, a specialized stapler (originally designed for picture framers) that makes setting glazing points a breeze. Restoration contractor Marc Bagala demonstrated the Steam Stripper, a stainless steel box containing a steam generator that he designed to quickly and safely soften old paint and glazing.

The conference reconvenes in New Orleans in October. For more information, visit www.traditionalbuildingshow.com. — *T.O.*

RECALLS

DeWalt has recalled about 44,000 cordless reciprocating saws because the trigger switch could short-circuit, posing a fire hazard. The recall involves DeWalt DC305 models with date codes 200619-49 through 200640-49. These tools were sold from May 2006 through November 2006. For more information or to arrange for a free repair, contact DeWalt at 866/751-9562 or go to www.dewalt.com.

Venmar Ventilation of Quebec has recalled about 75,000 heat-recovery ventilators after receiving reports that four units overheated and started fires. Affected models were sold from January 1991 through December 2001 under the Venmar brand and other names (Carrier, Heil, and Rheem, among others). For these units, Venmar will provide a free safety device that shuts off the ventilator when the motor overheats. To find out whether a particular model is affected by the recall, contact Venmar at 866/441-4645 or go to www.venmar.ca.

Affordability Inches Up; Indianapolis Leads

In the last quarter of 2006, the housing bust combined with falling mortgage rates to bring a bit of good news to prospective home buyers in much of the country: The supply of affordable homes increased nationwide by more than one percent. Not surprisingly, affordability was highest in the Midwest and lowest in California.

The findings are based on the latest NAHB/Wells Fargo Housing Opportunity Index, which was released in February.

"Today's reading indicates that 41.6 percent of new and existing homes sold during the fourth quarter of 2006 were affordable to families earning the national median income of $59,600," said NAHB president Brian Catalde in a press release. "This is slightly better than the 40.4 percent of homes that were affordable to median-income earners in the third quarter."

For the sixth quarter in a row, Indianapolis was the country's most affordable major housing market; 89 percent of the area's homes were affordable to buyers earning the local median household income ($65,100). At $113,000, the median price of homes sold in Indianapolis was $9,000 less than it had been the previous quarter.

Rounding out the top five most affordable metropolitan areas were Youngstown, Ohio; Detroit; Toledo, Ohio; and Buffalo, N.Y.

The nation's least affordable major housing market was Los Angeles, which has held the dubious distinction of being ranked last in this category for nine consecutive quarters. The median price of homes sold there — $525,000 — was almost five times that of homes sold in Indianapolis.

Adding to the discrepancy, Los Angeles' median income — $56,200 — was even lower than that of Indianapolis. Altogether, less than 2 percent of the Los Angeles region's housing stock was affordable to the median-income home buyer in the last quarter of 2006.

The L.A. basin is by no means the only place in the golden state where houses are expensive: More than half of the index's 52 least affordable metropolitan areas were in California. — *T.O.*