

# Green-friendly houses that pay to own them

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*Developer Aaron Needham last week at a subdivision in... (Mark Havnes/The Salt Lake Tribune )*

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ST. GEORGE - A Southern Utah developer is building zero-energy houses - homes he believes will offset utility bills and give cash back to owners over the years.

Aaron Needham, with sponsorships from General Electric and JP Morgan Chase Bank, is building the houses in Ivins and Washington city, as well as in Midway.

His company, Needham Homes and Development, has been building energy-efficient houses for two years in Cedar City. Recently, he had his renewable-energy-credit building program certified by an independent consultant.

"We now have documentation that will guarantee lower utility bills," Needham said.

Kevin Emerson, with Utah Clean Energy, described the builder's concept as "unique and innovative."

Clean Energy is a 6-year-old, nonprofit that works with Utah residents and government agencies to educate and advocate for energy-efficient policies.

Needham "is definitely breaking new ground," said Emerson. "Other builders in Utah are building zero-energy houses, but nothing like [Needham's] model.

"He is working with some impressive partners, especially Building America, that give him the measure of verification he needs."

Needham said energy-efficient houses are less subject to the negative forces influencing real-estate markets in many states, and to a lesser extent in

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Utah. That, he said, makes it more attractive to build the houses, which cost from \$200,000 to \$500,000.

"The reason people are not building homes now is because a lot of them are worth less the day you finish them than the day you started," Needham said. "Our homes are appreciating - not depreciating."

Needham said owners of his houses can expect to see a reduction in utility costs of up to 70 percent.

Such savings are achieved through construction methods that focus on sealing exterior doors and windows, installing special insulation and using energy-efficient appliances, furnaces and air conditioners.

The houses also use wind and solar power to generate a portion of their electricity and heating. And they provide renewable-energy credits.

A credit is equal to a single megawatt of electricity produced by the homeowner through solar panels or wind generator.

The homeowner will be paid up to \$500 a year by a program that will then broker the credits to offset the carbon footprint of another person or company. He said homeowners also can save through federal and state tax credits.

And when buying a house through JP Morgan Chase Bank - Needham's preferred lender - up to 9 percent of the house's sale price will go toward a reduced down payment, a lower interest rate and to offset six months of the first year's mortgage payment.

Needham said although the concept of energy-efficient construction is not new, his claims can be quantified and verified according to independent research.

Some of that research was done by Consol, a Stockton, Calif., firm that manages the Building America program for the U.S. Department of Energy.

Abe Cubano, a research engineer for Consol, said he has evaluated and authenticated Needham's claims, saying they are in line with federal standards. He believes the green builder is the nation's first to bring together different elements such as financing constructing, brokering renewable energy credits and appraising into a single package.

"He's done all the legwork. [Needham's] homes produce something. They create a residual income."

Cubano said Utah is a good place for such a program to lay its foundation because the state does not present the level of bureaucratic hoops to jump through that a state such as California does.

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