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## Brave new lean, 'green' world

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Staff Writer **Date:** December 18, 2007 **Section:**

\* Once the province of environmental visionaries, energy-efficient innovations now economically viable for all.

How it works and tax savings

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention.

So, it's not surprising that, as energy costs skyrocket, environmental concerns mount, house inventories idle, and a slow construction market keeps builders in the red, some area contractors see salvation in going "**green**."

"Finally, with the slowdown, builders are taking time to evaluate the benefits" of energy-efficient technologies, said Matt Ross, of Sarasota-based Eco-\$mart Homes & Buildings.

Founded in 1993, Eco-\$mart sells environmentally sound, energy-efficient materials to homeowners, contractors and developers.

Ross said business has increased steadily in the last few years, with income doubling since 2003 to about \$1.25 million in 2006.

"**Green** is on everyone's radar," he said, noting many Eco-\$mart customers are veteran builders responding to an emerging market.

"Many have been around for decades. They are calling us more and more," Ross said. "Builders are looking for ways to differentiate themselves from other builders. It's a win-win."

One such builder is David Schroeders, of Schroeders Homes Inc., in Venice.

A sixth-generation contractor, Schroeders has been building homes in Sarasota and Charlotte counties since 1994.

Last year, the slowdown offered a respite to retool with a **green**

emphasis, Schroeders said.

Schroeders used Mortgage Industry National Home Energy Rating software to model "what the electrical savings would be" if Energy Star-rated appliances were installed in a new home.

"We kept tweaking it until we got to the most cost-effective," he said, noting projected energy costs for a 2,400-square-foot home were whittled to \$100 a month or less.

And this was in a conventional home. Dramatic savings followed when Schroeders found that installing photovoltaic -- or PV -- panels in tandem with Energy Star appliances, could create a "zero energy" home at moderate costs.

Schroeders Homes Inc. now builds zero-energy homes exclusively.

"We've sold seven, eight of them," Schroeders said. "This is below our normal pace (before the slowdown), but better than" the current market.

As far as he is concerned, going "**green**" now will pay dividends for years.

"We've had such a big response from Realtors and builders," Schroeders said. "We really feel this is the way it is going. When the market picks up again, we are not going to abandon this."

It's a regional trend, said Adrienne Henzmann, of the Florida Solar Energy Center at the University of Central Florida.

"The public is asking for it," she said. "Builders have an awareness of it. It's a race to meet that demand."

Niche to norm

Schroeders said a growing number of home buyers view energy efficiency as a priority.

"All the people we've been working with are looking for energy-efficient homes," he said.

While a niche market now, Schroeders predicted this type of "energy-aware" home buyer will soon be the standard.

"Most consumers don't look at energy consumption in homes like they do with an automobile with miles-per-gallon, but they are starting to," he said.

Ross said consumers are "more educated, more concerned about

sustainability, with global warming and oil prices" in headlines daily.

"That is certainly the case," Henzmann said. "If it's a fossil fuel, that cost is going up."

Kitson & Partners, which is building a 17,000-acre "**green** city" of up to 45,000 residents on the former Babcock Ranch, is banking on this.

"We're finding home buyers want **green** homes, are looking for them," Kitson CEO Syd Kitson said. "From a marketing perspective, the market is already there. Price is still a driving force, but people today truly have a changing attitude -- they want **green**."

The bottom line is "**green**" building is good for the bottom line.

"The economics of it are very good," Ross said.

"It just makes sense because the cost of the house, after rebates, is less than a conventional building," Schroeders said. "That is the one thing I really want to get across: Five- to 10-percent more in additional construction costs can save energy costs by 70 percent."

When are savings recouped?

"The first month and every month you live in the home," Schroeders said.

As the biggest obstacle to "**green**" building -- higher upfront prices -- are trimmed by cost-cutting technologies and a growing market's economy of scale, rebates and tax credits are spurring investment.

"Incentives," said Bruce Kershner of the Florida Solar Energy Industries Association, "are the key to building the market."

Incentives

Kershner said the role of incentives is "to bring down costs, to bridge that gap" to make "**green**" building affordable.

"Some technology may be a little pricey now for the average homeowner," he said. "Until we get the market built here in Florida to bring down costs, we have to have a successful incentive program. Right now, it's a small one, but it's a step in the right direction."

Kershner said since 2006, Florida has offered homeowners \$4 per watt rebate to install a PV system, and \$500 for a solar hot-water heater.

If Gov. Charlie Crist has his way with the state Legislature, Kershner said more incentives will be offered soon.

State incentives are augmented by rebates from some local governments and utilities.

Florida Power & Light, Southwest Florida's primary electric utility, is developing an incentive package, said David Bates in FP&L's Miami office.

Now, the utility offers a \$1-a-watt rebate for PV systems, boosting savings to \$5 per watt.

These incentives are also enhanced by federal tax credits.

Retrofit rewards

While the emphasis is on new homes, Kershner said retrofitting is "probably the easier thing a homeowner can do. If you are talking about a payback, that is probably the biggest, fastest way."

The Florida Solar Energy Industries Association maintains a list of **green**-certified contractors and builders who specialize in retrofits, he said.

"A solar contractor can help (homeowners)," Kershner said. "You can, easily, with current rebates and incentives more than cut the cost of a solar hot-water heater in half."

While retrofits are eventually cost-effective, Schroeders said, it requires a "whole system approach" which is more complex than just putting solar panels on a house.

In addition to PV panels and a solar-water heater, zero-energy homes need well-insulated windows and roofs, as well as an energy-efficient air-conditioning system.

Ross said these innovations can be enhanced with recycled roof materials, alternative decking, and other products.

Schroeders said zero energy can withstand a Category 5 hurricane, which fosters additional savings in insurance premiums.

Businesses can reap even greater rewards by going "**green**," Kershner said.

"A lot of our contractor members work closely with not only home builders, but with a lot of commercial developers," he said. "Especially big-box stores; it's ideal to put a solar array on top of those buildings."

Schroeders said businesses pay more for electricity than residential

users, so they recoup even more savings by lowering consumption.

"On a commercial system, the payback is about three years," he said.  
"The federal tax credit is 30 percent on residential; on a commercial system, it is unlimited."

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