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Is Going Green Worth the Green When Remodeling?

By Cathy Tyson



Laura Arkell shows a Guildstone countertop and sink in the Douglass Design showroom that is made with 60 percent organic materials. Photo C. Tyson

With Earth Day right around the corner, it's a time to reflect on how homeowners and apartment dwellers, along with the City of Lafayette, weigh the costs and benefits of making sustainable choices. Are residents willing to spend a bit more to go green?

Obviously, most residents have a budget and do the math when making choices about replacing appliances or in the course of a major, or even minor, remodel. Designer Laura Arkell at Douglass Designs wholeheartedly agrees that the majority of their clients absolutely make green choices that are functional as well as beautiful, even if it may cost a bit more, since they are looking for quality finishes that will stand the test of time.

Moraga resident Judy Rowland did a significant amount of research on all the components of their remodel, looking at, as she puts it, "price and saving the planet," and took into account long term energy savings. Ultimately she and husband Jon, who plan to stay in their home for many years to come, opted to replace all their windows, install a tankless water heater, select energy efficient kitchen appliances and put in an attic fan. They are very happy with the overall results, but pleasantly

surprised at the fan, that turns on and off automatically and keeps the whole house cooler during the summer.

Lafayette landlords John and Suzie Bannister used Moraga-based contractor Bob McLaughlin of McLaughlin Renovation and Construction to update a small downtown apartment complex. McLaughlin explained that making more energy efficient choices "makes a lot of sense," paying for themselves in the long run and costs only slightly more. In his experience, his clients usually choose to incorporate a range of more efficient items, including lighting, windows, toilets, showerheads, insulation and especially furnaces.

There are a range of prices for all of these products, but McLaughlin believes that even relatively basic models are a huge step up from older original versions that can be found in many Lamorinda homes. McLaughlin - "Builder Bob" to his friends - said that many of his projects include new windows. Clients can choose more economical vinyl windows, or go with high-end wood windows, but both are durable, have insulation that protects from extreme temperatures and block most of the sun's ultraviolet rays.

He acknowledged that current building regulations spelled out in the state's CALGreen program now requires more environmentally friendly items that nudge buyers in the green direction. For instance high density insulation has to have an R-15 value, compared to the old standard of R-13, the measure of insulation's ability to reduce the rate of heat flow. Also, at least half of all light fixtures

in kitchens and bathrooms must be energy efficient, long lasting LED, and not the older incandescent type.

First of its kind in the nation, CALGreen is California's more stringent green building code that mandates new buildings and renovations meet certain sustainability and ecological standards to improve air quality and cut down on energy and water consumption.

According to Pacific Gas & Electric, home heating and cooling typically accounts for 44 percent of an energy bill. Homeowners would be wise to consider long-term savings of updating furnace and air conditioning units.

Desiree Medler, marketing analyst for Clean Air HVAC Company, said that the bigger the home, the bigger the benefit of a high-efficiency furnace. She adds that ducting should also be taken into consideration, since that's where most of the heat loss happens. Furnaces have an average lifespan of around 20 years, and become less efficient over time. Check out www.pge.com for rebates offers.

Low-flow toilets are now the norm. Responding to California's drought, the Department of Water Resources is encouraging installation of low-flow toilets with a generous rebate program. Swapping out an old fashioned model made between 1980 and 1994, which uses about 3.5 gallons per flush, with a new high efficiency model uses less than half of that amount of water 1.28 gallons per use, which saves on consumer's water bills and gets proud owners a check for \$100.

Even the City of Lafayette has made a real effort to help citizens save energy, water and money with their partnership with Rising Sun Energy Center's California Youth Energy Services program, which provides free home energy and water audits via their Green House Calls. It is slated to start this summer. Call (510) 665-1501, extension 5, or visit the city website at www.lovelafayette.org for more information.

As of July 1, Lafayette city leaders were the first in Lamorinda to ban plastic single use bags, and have instituted a mandatory 10 cent charge, levied by the merchant for each paper bag, to encourage shoppers to bring their own re-usable bags to tote purchases home.

In addition, residents will soon have a choice of where their energy comes from - either greener power from Marin Clean Energy or continue on with PG & E. According to Megan Canales, Assistant Planner, the program should be on-line in late summer or early fall, after an extensive outreach effort.

Residents with solar panels should note that MCE has lower rates for Net Energy Metering than PG&E. For homeowners who use more energy than their system produces, MCE charges a lower amount than PG&E. Energy provider MCE has waived the membership analysis cost, so the cost to the city to offer this option is nothing. In addition, no tax dollars are used to fund MCE, but there is a small monthly exit fee to take into account.

Because many Lamorinda residents tend to stay in their homes, and choose to remodel rather than move away from friends and family, weighing the costs and long term benefits of green home improvements is a necessary part of the equation.



This unusual teardrop-designed shower head is low flow, and meets CALGreen standards. Photo C. Tyson

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