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Local charity takes the LEED

Ultra-green group home planned for Hopewell Township

By Krystal Knapp

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES - HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP

Environmentally friendly construction projects have been springing up all over, from green school buildings to green municipal buildings to shopping centers with solar roofs. Now a local nonprofit has decided to enter a new frontier in the green landscape by building a sustainable group home.

Community Options, a national nonprofit group headquartered in West Windsor that serves people with disabilities, plans to build an environmentally friendly, LEED-certified group home in Hopewell Township, a project the organization's leaders say will be the first of its kind in New Jersey.

LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a rating system that serves as a benchmark for evaluating sustainability in construction projects.

The nonprofit, with the help of Hopewell Township and Princeton Design Guild, is building a four-bedroom home for people with disabilities on a farm on Harbourton Rocktown Road.

Back in 2005, the township partnered with the Friends of Open Valley Open Space not only to preserve open space in the township but also to reuse on-site structures on such properties for affordable housing. The Friends purchased a 30-acre parcel, the Arena Farm, and sold one acre with a farmhouse and two barns to the township for about \$200,000.

"It was a great idea for reuse on the preserved properties, and a unique opportunity," said Paul Pogorzelski, business administrator of Hopewell Township. "We've been working diligently over the last few years to make the project a reality."

The township considered restoring the farmhouse and reusing it as a group home, but the building was in such disrepair that it required demolition. After requesting proposals from nonprofits, the township contracted with Community Options to build a new home on the site and will receive at least four affordable housing unit credits for the project. The property has been deeded to Community Options, and the township contributed \$50,000 toward the demolition as part of its affordable housing spending plan.

"We are very excited about it," Pogorzelski said. "It helps advance our affordable housing program while meeting a need for people with disabilities."

Construction of the new home is being managed by the Princeton Design Guild. Kevin Wilkes, founder and managing director of the architecture firm, said the project will be environmentally friendly from start to finish.

The farmhouse and a large barn on site are being disassembled, and a smaller barn is being relocated to a nearby property. Lumber and other items from the barn and farmhouse will be harvested for reuse in other projects. All glass, metal, nonpainted wood, wiring, pipes, stone and concrete is being recycled, and less than 10% of the existing materials from the farmhouse will go into a landfill.

Designed to blend in with its rural setting and fit in with the fabric of the community, the new home will include many environmentally friendly features, including sustainable building materials, radiant heat, and lighting strategies that make the best use of sunlight. Each bedroom will have its own bathroom, but in all other respects, Wilkes said, the home will be like any other single-family house, with a kitchen, living room and TV

room. "It will not feel like institution," he said. "It will be a comfy, cozy home where people with disabilities can develop friendships, live in dignity and thrive."

The construction, which will be funded with federal Housing and Urban Development money, should be completed by mid-2011, Wilkes said.

Community Options, which built its first group home in Robbinsville about two decades ago, now operates 147 group homes throughout the United States, with 70 in New Jersey.

Robert Stack, president and CEO of Community Options, said the investment in green construction will pay off in the long run in terms of both the environment and the energy savings. "It's like buying a hybrid car," he said. "It cost more initially, but the investment is worth it."

"We're very excited to build a home that is green from the ground up," Stack said. "It will be barrier-free and accessible to people with disabilities and we won't have to retrofit it like we would an existing home."

"We're glad to have this partnership with Hopewell and we appreciate how the local community has embraced this project," he said. "We would love to do something like this with other houses. ... Everyone needs a place to live where they can be part of a community."