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'Green' Realtor building a straw bale house



By Connie Adair

Ruth Bowes doesn't just talk the talk, she walks the walk. As a member of the National Association of Green Agents and Brokers (NAGAB), she offers clients tips about energy-efficient homes, indoor quality and energy-saving features. In her personal life, she is taking green a step farther by building a straw bale house.

Bowes, an agent with Royal LePage Royal City Realty in Rockwood, Ont., has lived in Halton for 16 years. During a visit to The Everdale Organic Farm and Environmental Learning Centre in 2003, she and her husband Tom saw their first straw bale house. "We thought, wouldn't it be great" to have an energy-efficient home. That house also gave power back to the grid, she says.

Long-time environmentalists, the Bowes wondered about a putting a straw bale addition to their house, but decided they'd rather start from scratch.

A tour of straw bale houses led them to nearby Eden Mills, a community striving to be the first in North America to be carbon neutral. Being carbon neutral means the carbon emitted must be equal to the carbon absorbed. Eden Mills is following the lead of a village in England (see www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk for details).

Eden Mills residents are currently establishing what their carbon footprint is, and will then set about to reduce it, Bowes says. "We were interested in living in Eden Mills and that came to a head last fall when we went on the tour. We saw a lot for sale, bought it and decided to build."

The community of about 150 houses has home prices ranging from \$200,000 to approximately \$700,000, she says. It's a vibrant community with an old mill, renovated by architect Charles Simon, who has been building passive solar housing since the 1970s. He lives in the community, along with like-minded people and artists. Simon spearheaded the carbon neutral program, she says.

One of the community's projects is to create a trail to Rockwood, which is walking distance to the community but currently requires a trip by car around a wooded area. A trail will allow residents to walk or bike to Rockwood for groceries and restaurants, she says. A community co-op store is another way the community will reduce fuel consumption.

Bowes' brother-in-law is an architect and is designing the home, compensating for the 16-inch wide walls that the straw bale house features. Straw bales are wrapped in wire mesh, sewn together and topped with layers of cement/stucco to create smooth interior and exterior wall surfaces. Straw bale walls have an R-40 insulation rating.

The straw bale house is still a niche market, but will grow in popularity, she predicts. The couple's builder, Ben Polley, is the Green Party of Ontario rep for downtown Guelph. He has been building straw bale houses for eight years, as well as other green buildings.

In the photo: Ruth Bowes

The Bowes' home includes passive solar heating. The front of the house, which faces solar south, has big windows to let sun shine in during the winter. In the summer, the sun is too high to get past the angled roof.

Polished concrete floors in the living and dining room will absorb heat from the sun and help heat the home at night. Fibreglass frame windows were chosen over vinyl because they will off-gas in the factory and not in the home, she says. Low VOC paints and stains, a heat or energy recovery ventilator and Eco-logo certified drywall will also be used.

The house will also be built to incorporate wiring so it is ready for solar panels down the road, she says. There is also a flat deck area in preparation for a future green roof. A grey water system is being plumbed in, but for now won't be installed.

When designing the home, Bowes also put her Senior Real Estate Specialist designation to work. The two-storey, basement-less home features main-floor living so its occupants can age in place. The main floor has a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and a master suite with a semi ensuite bathroom.

The main-floor bathroom has a shower, looking ahead to the time when senior occupants may have trouble getting in and out of a bathtub.

The upper level of the 1,800-square-foot home has two rooms and a large multi-purpose room. The three-bedroom, two-bathroom home also has water-saving low-flush toilets. The power source will be either propane or oil. The exterior will have a steel roof finished with ceramics for durability.

The couple is also investigating whether the municipality will approve a black water (treated water from the septic system) wetland.

Bowes, who is in her third year selling real estate, spent the first two years establishing her business, always with an eye to being green. Since January, she says she has been actively marketing herself as a green agent.

"People come to me because of that. They find the idea interesting," she says.

"Houses are big energy users and it makes sense that I can point out simple things like a place for the recycling box" or energy-efficient features, she says.

Her business practices are also green, including:

- using and promoting clean energy sources where available
- reducing emissions by carefully planning travel
- reducing print materials through increased use of the Internet, email and through the use of new technologies
- printing only when necessary on FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) approved paper
- promoting reducing, reusing and recycling

Many of Bowes' clients in the 25-35 year range have an interest in living green, but it may be because she attracts certain groups of people with similar values, she says. However, the interest in being green extends to all age groups. "My family is blended. Margaret and Erica are my step daughters, and Alannah is our daughter," she says. "They are all tree-huggers and environmentalists and very excited about the project."

Bowes says building the straw bale house is giving her an opportunity to learn first hand about selecting and buying greener building materials, as well as living in a community striving to bring environmental issues to the forefront.

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