

Recession forces developer to try new housing approach

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In Redmond, a new approach to developing houses is being tried in response to the recession. Taltree EcoVillage is part co-housing, part custom design and part speculative development, and it could change the way buyers think about space.

Taltree EcoVillage will have nine houses, a community house, underground parking, walking paths and community gardens. It will be on undeveloped forest land and easily accessible to Microsoft's campus by bike.

Taltree buyers will reserve a house, and then work with the architect and developer to customize it to meet their needs for space and finishes. Homebuyers also will work together to make decisions about the whole project, similar to the way co-housing projects are created.

YS Development is the developer and Johnston Architects is the architect.

Four of the nine homes are reserved. Buyers will finance construction of their homes with custom construction loans.

Costs will range from \$550,000 to \$825,000, though an affordable unit has been reserved for \$385,000. Houses will range from 1,470 square feet to 2,500 square feet. Each will have at least three bedrooms and two baths.

Matt Muhsam with Green Dwelling Seattle is handling community outreach for Taltree. He called it a hybrid between custom design and speculative development. But he said it is almost co-housing, with a community house and other common spaces that will be jointly managed, though each house will have private space including a separate back yard.

The community house will be 700 square feet. The program will be determined by the homeowners but there are plans for a small kitchen, craft room, living area and guest space, all under a green roof.

Muhsam said this approach puts more control in the hands of owners and takes some away from the developer.

"By not forging ahead until we have a major constituency... we have sort of eliminated or mitigated the risk that the developer puts him or herself at," he said. "It's trying to look at it from the perspec-



The nine-unit Taltree EcoVillage in Redmond is part co-housing, part custom design and part speculative development. YS Development is the developer and Johnston Architects is the architect.

tive of the people who will live there, rather than the people who will build it."

Recession forced a different approach after the project was halted in the summer of 2008. Originally, Taltree was a traditional speculative development. Muhsam said Taltree now is more interesting and innovative.

"I think the recession has done wonders for the development world," he said. "It forced builders and developers to embrace a different paradigm. They had no choice, they were either going to start working smarter or they were not going to work at all."

He points to other builders, such as Martha Rose of Martha Rose Construction, who have also adapted their business models due to the recession. Muhsam hopes this innovation will continue. He said a group of five Microsoft employees who are friends are interested in designing their own homes, so a similar project to suit their needs could be built near Taltree.

Taltree is part of Redmond's Innovative Housing Demonstration Program, which allows higher density, reduced setbacks, modified fire lanes, and encourages preservation of trees and natural space. Under Redmond's current code, six units could have been built on the one-acre site. The demonstration program would

have allowed 12, but YS chose nine units to preserve the natural feeling of the space.

Houses will be built to 4- or 5-star Built Green, and will be 50 percent more efficient than code through air sealing, insulation, high performance windows and a high performance boiler.

Site impacts will be reduced as much as possible. The team has identified all trees on site and is trying to keep as many as possible. All paving will be pervious.

One more house must be pre-sold before the project can break ground. Once that happens, the team will secure financing for any units that have not pre-sold and begin construction, which should take 18 months.

Muhsam said this project has been inspiring.

"We're trying to change a lot of things about how development works and... the short run impact we can have on community," he said. "We're sort of introducing people to this business model that puts them in charge of building their own home for the same price."

For more information, visit <http://tiny.cc/15kcg>.

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