



PHOTOS BY DELCIA LOPEZ/STAFF

Lonnie Garza, an employee with Energy Sense, an Energy Star rating firm, runs a 'door blower test' on a new home to make sure it complies with the federal program.

Energy Star homes don't cost much more

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Star home cost?

"It's added some expense to the house," said Shane Anthony, vice president of customer relations at Pulte Homes in San Antonio, which builds all of its homes under the Energy Star guidelines. "We're building a tighter house. It probably adds a few percentage points, maybe \$1,000, to the cost of the home."

Although an Energy Star home may cost slightly more upfront for home buyers, it's likely to save them much more money over time, Anthony said.

The average American family spends \$1,900 a year on energy bills, mostly on trying to heat or cool a home, according to the EPA.

But if Energy Star homes save around 20 percent annually, that's a \$380 savings that continues to lower the cost of ownership for those homeowners.

If all homes could reduce energy usage by 10 percent, Americans would save \$20 billion annually in utility costs and avoid the greenhouse-gas equivalent of 25 million vehicles on the road, according to the EPA.

How it works

Energy Star homes go through three rounds of evaluations by a third-party company. For builders who construct 85 or more homes a year, the EPA requires that one of every seven homes be tested. Smaller builders must have every house tested.

In turn, the EPA audits those firms as often as four times a year to make sure they've accurately evaluated homes.

"It's a tight, well-run program," Morris said. "There's no room for error or bribery or anything like that."

Ratings start at the design stage, when the third-party company evaluates house plans.

A computer program rates the anticipated energy costs of a home design, said Matt Stevens, director for Green Zone Home, an Austin-based company that tests KB homes in San Antonio. "If the insulation, the mechanical equipment or other items



Builders of at least 85 homes a year must have one of every seven houses tested to make sure they meet Energy Star-certification guidelines. For smaller builders, every home must be tested.

aren't meeting the code, we make recommendations."

A site inspection follows after framing — before drywall gets installed — to make sure the house has the proper insulation, said Cary Weaver, area manager for Energy Sense, a rating firm.

The company also checks to make sure the base plates around doors, walls and windows are sealed. Raters examine windows for proper installation.

The final inspection tests the air conditioning ducts for leaks and includes a "blower door test," where testers remove the front door and install a powerful fan in its place, Weaver said.

The fan sucks air from the home to reduce air pressure inside, allowing the higher-pressure air outside the home to leak in through cracks and openings. Problem areas can be spotted before the home is sold.

Texas vet loans

San Antonio participation in Energy Star has jumped thanks to the city's high military population.

The Texas Veterans Housing Assistance Program, a popular mortgage program for military veterans, requires that all new homes meet Energy Star requirements.

In San Antonio, for instance,

as many as 20 percent of KB Home buyers use the Texas vet loans, Stevens said.

"With San Antonio being a big military town, a lot of the home buyers are using this loan program," Stevens said. "That's what's driving so many builders to participate."

The Texas Veterans Land Board, which administers the Texas vet loan program, goes beyond even the EPA rules and requires that every one of its homes be tested by a third-party company.

In other Texas cities, utility companies have offered financial incentives to home builders, helping drive the state's participation in Energy Star, Stevens said.

Only a handful of states — Nevada, Alaska, Iowa and Rhode Island — have higher Energy Star participation rates among new-home builders.

Nationally, just 12 percent of new homes receive Energy Star certification.

Marketing edge

Builders who do participate in Energy Star get one marketing advantage: bragging rights.

"As energy costs continue to rise, more builders need to be building homes with energy efficiency in mind," Morris said.

"If you're a builder, you have some kind of responsibility. It's a service to the customer."

Morris said the program isn't complicated and minimally modifies traditional building plans.

"It's not brain surgery," he said. "It's so easy anybody can do it."

Cathy Teague, a spokeswoman for KB Home in San Antonio, said many buyers have started looking for Energy Star builders. "It's a decision-making point for the buyer," she said.

"If they're worried about energy efficiency and are sensitive to what the consumption of fossil fuels does to the environment, it's a factor."

The program also has had an unexpected benefit for Pulte.

The company has Energy Sense evaluate all of its homes, which helps catch problems with a home's ductwork and other systems before construction is complete. "Before, there was no way to fix some of this if a home was already finished," Anthony said. "It just was the way it was."

The Energy Star program, though, has helped the company cut down on service calls from homeowners.

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