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Environmental houses hailed in downtown Sacramento

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It would be easy to miss the small cluster of nine tall, skinny houses tucked around a courtyard on F Street a few blocks north of downtown Sacramento.

But city leaders and local environmental groups say the tiny 9onF project has a significance that goes far beyond its size:

It is one of the greenest new housing projects in the region, and the first in Sacramento's central city to be officially certified as environmentally sustainable by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Representatives from the city, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, environmental groups and businesses gathered at 9onF Saturday to praise the project and promote their ideas for a sustainable Sacramento.

"This is exactly the kind of infill addition we want to see in the city," said Mayor Heather Fargo, who arrived with SMUD director Genevieve Shiroma in a SMUD plug-in hybrid vehicle.

Projects like 9onF, Shiroma said, "mean we don't have to build new power plants that run on fossil fuel."

The three-story houses range in size from 1,300 to 1,550 square feet and are priced at about \$495,000, said developer Jeremy Drucker.

He said one of the units is in escrow, and another one has been reserved.

The units of the project that line F Street look more traditional, with clapboard siding. The houses along the courtyard have a more contemporary, loft-like feel.

Drucker estimated that the energy bills for 9onF will be 75 percent lower than normal.

Three of the nine three-story homes come with solar panels already installed. The use of solar prevents 1,600 pounds of carbon dioxide – considered the chief culprit in global warming – from being emitted into the atmosphere each year, said Wade Hughes, manager of SMUD's SolarSmart homes program.

Solar is an option on three more of the 9onF houses, but the final three along F Street get too much shade for solar to be viable, Hughes said.

All of the houses use geothermal technology for heating and cooling. A pipe filled with water sits in a well deep underground. It cools and warms the air for the heating and cooling system – a major energy savings.

SMUD's Hughes said it's the first residential project he knows of on the West Coast that combines solar and geothermal systems. "That's pretty cool stuff."

Inside, Drucker used solid wood, wood floors and concrete instead of carpet, which can give off toxic fumes.

"This project should be the standard, not the exception, for all new residential construction as far as we're concerned," said Graham Brownstein, executive director of the Environmental Council of Sacramento, one of the sponsors of Saturday's event.

Ron Vrilakas, the architect of 9onF, has made a name for himself designing urban projects such as the new apartment complex at 18th and L streets and the conversion of a former auto dealership at 16th and J streets into restaurants, offices and lofts.

He said the greenest feature of 9onF is its location in the middle of a walkable urban neighborhood just blocks from downtown high-rise office buildings.

"When you do any high-density project in the city, you've done the most significant thing you can do toward a green end," he said. "This just takes it to the nth degree."

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