

Maine Homes by Down East

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Greener Acres

Is one of Maine's new eco-friendly subdivisions right for you?

By Josée Ellison

It's remarkable how quickly a community can form. Just five years ago, when Patrice Cappelletti found the 25-acre plot now known as Solar Way, in Cumberland, it was an over-logged, barren stretch of country. But Cappelletti, owner of the building firm Live Solar Maine and a mother of two, saw an opportunity to create something more than just a home for her family. "I was thinking, 'How do you build a little community that's like-minded? All solar-powered and really healthy. It could have a big organic garden that we'll share, and chickens.' I thought, 'I'll create a solar village and show the world a mom can do it!'"

She partnered with architect and energy consultant Emily Mottram, erected a yurt on-site to live in temporarily, and, in 2015, broke ground on the first of what will ultimately be five eco-friendly homes. Inspired by traditional Maine farmhouses, they vary in size, but share common elements, like southern orientations and expansive windows, solar panels, superinsulated walls, and heat pumps. They cost about 7 to 10 percent more upfront than a standard stick build, but each is either "net-zero" or "net-zero ready," meaning it generates, or is capable of generating, as much energy as it consumes over the course of the year. Mottram says net-zero homeowners can expect a return on their investments in about 15 years, if not sooner, because "I can guarantee you, the cost of oil will go up again."

Cappelletti and Mottram are among a number of local pros putting their efforts into eco-conscious subdivisions, a trend

The first house constructed on Cumberland's Solar Way is outfitted with 20 solar panels (but wired for 30, which would elevate it to net-zero status) and a charging station for an electric car in the garage. The porch is five feet deep — ideal for allowing sunlight into the home in winter and providing shade in the summer.

that has taken off in California, where all new homes must be net-zero by 2020. Freeport's Kelsey Brook encompasses 15 homes, including a few net-zero, modular ones by Portland's BrightBuilt Home, that are required to meet one of several green-building standards. At Baird Landing in Freeport, where developers/builders Jonathan Lobo and Alex Burnham hope to complete 10 custom, net-zero-capable homes, three structures are occupied; a fourth lot has sold, and another is under contract. And in Brunswick, developer Bob Muller has sold one net-zero-ready house in his new Douglas Ridge subdivision — where buyers can opt for a modular structure by BrightBuilt or New Hampshire's Unity Homes — and is laying the infrastructure for 16 more. Homes in the subdivisions start just above \$400,000 for a two-to-four bedroom on a half-acre lot.

A few years ago, Maine's green building market was not so bullish. Two recent developments that set out to be net-zero failed to live up to those

intentions, as, one by one, buyers opted out of efficiency upcharges like solar panels, which cost, on average, \$13,188 for a standard 6kW array, after federal tax credits, according to the cost comparison website Energy Sage. "They were before their time," Muller says of the earlier efforts. "It used to be, 'What can I get for granite countertops?' Now, buyers are saying, 'What can I get for an energy system and how much will it save me?'" he adds, noting that 45 potential buyers showed up at his first open house last fall, all armed with questions about efficiency.

When even a few homeowners don't hold up their end of the bargain, there's a ripple effect, says BrightBuilt director Parlin Meyer, who speaks from experience. At Yarmouth's 26-lot Village Run development, buyers had a choice between putting up net-zero modular homes from her firm or traditional stick-built houses. All but three chose the latter. "As the development transitioned into more of anything goes, a lot of people [who were interested in net-zero] dropped out," Meyer says. "People said, 'I want the people next door to have common priorities in terms of conservation.' One hundred percent buy-in is important."

Since there is little data on the resale values of net-zero homes, it's critical to work with a Realtor who understands how

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Builder Patrice Cappelletti's Solar Way home features interior windows and brick flooring salvaged from an Augusta mill; newel posts from a New England farmhouse; beams from a Bowdoin fraternity; and a chalkboard hearth from a local schoolhouse. Tall windows flood the south-facing living room (defined with an Angela Adams rug) with sunlight.



the higher up-front cost will pay off in the long term, says Phil Kaplan, principal at Portland's Kaplan Thompson Architects, of which BrightBuilt is an offshoot. (Find local agents trained in efficiency and sustainability issues at greenresourcecouncil.org.) He also advises buyers to ask banks for green-certified appraisers, who understand how to factor efficiency features into their evaluations. For example, "a pellet stove doesn't check any boxes for most appraisers, but it sure should," Kaplan says, noting that his own home was valued more than \$50,000 higher after it was assessed by a green-certified appraiser.

Back at Solar Way, Cappelletti sold all five of her homes without ever even putting up a sign. She lives at the end of the street now, in an airtight post-and-beam with reclaimed wood framing and interior windows repurposed from an old mill. They haven't planted the communal garden yet, but one of the first buyers put in a wood-fired sauna that all the homeowners use. Mottram is going to share an office above the garage of the newest homeowner, a landscape designer who moved in late last year. The night she arrived, everyone gathered around the woodstove in the sauna-owner's house for a celebratory potluck. "It was so much fun," Cappelletti said a few days later. "It's exactly the tribe I wanted to create when I bought this land." □