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Builder adopts 'back-to-the-earth' approach

*By Kelly Fraser
For the Journal*

AMHERST -- Before his neighbor rode up one day on a bicycle while he was fixing up his barn, Amherst resident Neil Wenberg hadn't considered making his new home "green."

Wenberg's neighbor happened to be Mark Klein, co-owner of Gimme Shelter construction, and a few years later Wenberg is the proud owner of home that features solar panels and a masonry heating system.

Although solar panels may be the most apparent green feature of a Gimme Shelter home, Klein and co-owner Jim McKnight say what makes one of their homes truly energy efficient is hidden within its design.

Klein and McKnight focus on first making a home passively efficient by facing the home in a direction that maximizes the sunlight it can absorb. A house's placement, along with proper insulation does the most toward reducing energy costs, Klein said.

Wenberg said the most recent energy bill was \$14 for his 5,293 square foot home.

McKnight estimated that on average a Gimme Shelter home with energy efficient technologies and higher quality building materials like native pine instead of plywood is about 10 percent to 15 percent more expensive than a conventional home of about the same size.

It takes about eight to 10 years before the savings from a solar energy system offset its initial cost, Klein said.

"Basically when you buy a renewable energy system you're paying for your lifetime supply of energy all at once," he said.

McKnight said Gimme Shelter clients see the added cost as a long-term investment.

"Most of our clients, when they walk in the door, say that this is the house they're going to be carried out of," he said.

Klein and McKnight said they try to make the building process as collaborative as possible for their clients, even encouraging them to pick up a hammer and pitch in.

In addition to taking on about two or three custom home projects in the area a year, the Amherst construction company completes about three or four smaller-scale builds, conducts workshops and consults on sustainable home-building throughout the Midwest and installs masonry heating systems.

Klein said solar technology has changed little since he and McKnight founded Gimme Shelter 21 years ago. What has changed is his clients' awareness about the technologies, he said.

"I think it's a disservice to think we're waiting for some new technology," he said. " We're just waiting for commitment to change."
