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Living off the grid affordable, comfortable

Environment: Company plans energy-neutral subdivision in Fredericton

By Polly Leger – page B1

A Bathurst-based company is well on its way to creating North America's first fossil fuel-free subdivision.



Photo: David Smith/For the Telegraph-Journal

Axel Lerche, president of EcoPlusHome in Bathurst, is seen here in Fredericton on Tuesday. EcoPlusHome is one of three finalists in the running for a \$15,000 award from Scotiabank. The company was nominated for its innovation in home energy efficiency.

EcoPlusHome sells "net zero" prefabricated homes. Energy efficient and cost effective, these homes use only as much energy as they can create.

Axel Lerche, president of the company, has proven that living off the grid is not only affordable, but comfortable.

In December 2009, the company launched a test home in a cozy Bathurst suburb. The Kennys, a family of six, moved in and documented their life in the house for a year. In the dead of a harsh New Brunswick winter, their monthly energy bill was a measly \$19.

The 2,050-square-metre houses, prebuilt in Fredericton by Maple Leaf Homes, go far beyond proper insulation or double-paned windows to keep energy costs down. Instead, they use geothermal energy for power, photovoltaic panels on the roof for

electricity, and a solar thermal system for heat. Outfitted with energy-efficient appliances by German home appliance giant Bosch, the houses are so low impact that Lerche says they pay for themselves in 10 years.

After the success of its test home, EcoPlusHome is setting up the first net zero housing developments on the continent. Next month, two of these energy-neutral homes will be available in Moncton, along with one in Bathurst and another in Halifax.

Fredericton is getting behind fossil fuel-free housing in a big way. In July, six townhouses built by the company will go on the market. Thinking even bigger, the startup is developing a whole community of energy-neutral homes in a Fredericton subdivision, the first of its kind in the country.

Lerche says there's no reason being eco-friendly has to hurt the economy

"Saving the planet is great and important, as we all know, but it is about saving money as well," he said.

The homes run from \$279,000 to \$289,000, with buyers eligible for a \$7,500 rebate from the province.

"It is possible and affordable to build energy efficient," Lerche said.

Scotiabank seems to agree. On Tuesday, the bank announced EcoPlusHome is one of three finalists for an EcoLiving Award for innovation, a tip of the hat that comes with a \$15,000 cash prize.

The company caught the attention of judges because it not only stirred up interest in eco-friendly living, but also its potential for mainstream success, says Kim Brand, director of environmental affairs at Scotiabank. Although highly energy-efficient houses are par for the course in many European countries, it remains a largely untapped market in Canada.

Lerche said that is changing as people realize that being earth friendly can also save them money.

In addition to developments sprouting up in Atlantic Canada this summer, EcoPlusHome is working on houses in Vancouver, Toronto, Boston and even Arizona. "I see a snowball effect here," Lerche said of energy-neutral housing.

"We all want to change. Everyone wants to do it."