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Landlord creating new green space

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Messenger photo | Kristin Heinichen

Matthew Bennett, left, and Len Watkins of Dovetail Solar and Wind install solar panels this week on an energy-efficient student rental property being built on North Lancaster Street. If all goes as planned, the property's owner estimates monthly utility bills there will total anywhere from nothing to \$50.

Chamberlain is doing more than just complimenting Jones on his unconventional structure. He is implementing his own green approach. Chamberlain will complete construction on the first building in the area which is LEED certified - his new 3,500 plus square foot commercial office space for his real estate company. LEED - the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - certifications provide a standard for environmentally sustainable construction.

Athens rental owner Sean Jones says his decision to go green with one of his properties wasn't based on greenbacks but on principle.

His energy-efficient house will cost him roughly \$170,000, and it may take Jones years to see a return on his investment.

"It really is an experiment - I wanted to prove it can be done," Jones, owner of Rockside Rentals, said. "I'm trying to make it transparent, it's like living in any other house - as long as tenants are not deliberately being wasteful."

The house is located in the hub of student housing on North Lancaster Street in Athens. Jones bought the property, razed the existing structure and built a new house with insulated walls made from concrete, foam and recycled plastic. It is also furnished with photovoltaic arrays - made of multiple interconnected solar cells. The cells will convert solar energy into direct current electricity. The inverter will convert it to an alternating current which will be synchronized into the grid.

In turn, he expects this will greatly reduce renters' utility bills.

"If it works out really well their utility bills will be zero to \$50 a month," he said. "This house is beyond energy efficient - not just new windows and good insulation. We are trying to build a house that is as close to as energy independent as we can get it."

While the house will still be tied to the electrical grid, sunny days will keep the electric bill down. Matt Bennett of Dovetail Solar and Wind in Athens is installing the solar panels. According to Bennett, the house should harvest 320 kilowatt hours per month. But he estimates that the house will power more than twice that.

"It will cost more upfront, because Sean thinks it's the right thing to do," Bennett said. "This house should be exceptionally efficient, it has a small footprint. There are really no other houses like this one."

Also giving a nod to Jones' investment in green endeavors is real estate agent Russell Chamberlain of Athens Real-estate Company.

"It's absolutely a phenomenal thing simply because they will know that living in that house makes a statement," Chamberlain said.

"I won't see payback in my lifetime. And this also translates over to residential spaces - it makes a statement. This new construction is an opportunity to take advantage of new and existing technologies - you don't have to retrofit buildings. Anybody can do it," Chamberlain said.

Solar panel and installation for the rental is \$40,000, minus an \$18,000 grant from the Ohio Department of Development. Jones will also be eligible for a federal tax credit - 30 percent of the purchase for commercial structures, and no more than \$2,000 for residential. Other tax incentives will also be available.

Costs of the project may pay for themselves over time - especially if you consider the hike in energy costs, explained Jones. Though Jones has received "mixed" reviews from local landlords on how well these renewable energy systems will work, he has also received a lot of "good feedback," he said.

Wil Chandler of Athens Realty has not converted his rentals to green structures - but he supports an energy-efficient community and the trend that Jones is trying to set.

"I think it's a great idea. Everybody should do it anyhow because it's good for the environment and for the individuals whoever they are. It will save money and energy and hopefully make for a better world," Chandler said.

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