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By Kevin Smith, San Gabriel Valley Tribune, West Covina, Calif.

May 31--SANTA FE SPRINGS -- Comstock Homes is poised to break ground Saturday on a project the developer says is the nation's largest solar community.

Villages at Heritage Springs will include 511 homes constructed with high-efficiency solar roof tiles and a host of other energy-saving features. All told, those features will reduce homeowners' utility bills by as much as 60 percent, the company said.

Manhattan Beach-based Comstock has partnered with San Jose-based SunPower, which will install its SunTile solar roof tiles on each of the homes.

"Each home is calculated by square footage, so a third to half of each roof will be covered by solar panels," said Bob Comstock, owner of Comstock Homes. "The cost per home is about \$20,000."

Ordinarily, that would significantly hike the cost of the homes. But Comstock said his company is pricing the units to be competitive.

Villages at Heritage Springs will include both single-family homes and townhomes built around a private recreation area with a pool, spa, barbecue, picnic area, playground and basketball court.

"The single-family homes will start at about \$500,000 and go up to \$750,000," Comstock said. "We'll have three different product types -- alley-loaded, with garages off of the alley, cluster homes of two and three stories with a central courtyard, and traditional single-family homes."

The project's townhomes will include two product lines. One will feature units of 1,300 square feet to 1,700 square feet. The other larger units will be 1,800 square feet, he said.

The townhomes will start in the high \$300,000 range and top out in the high \$400,000 range, according to Comstock.

Other energy-saving features include dual-pane, low-energy windows, high-efficiency heating and air conditioning, tankless water heaters, energy-efficient lighting and special cool-roof tiles.

The Villages project is being built on the site of an active oil field, and 26 of the submersible wells will remain in operation, according to Comstock.

Comstock isn't the only developer that's going green with energy-efficient features.

Clayton Homes, a Knoxville, Tenn.-based maker of manufactured and modular homes, recently unveiled a new, eco-friendly Clayton "i-house" that's Energy Star rated and at least 30 percent more energy-efficient than a traditional home, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Crafted with a contemporary design, the home features solar panels, a rainwater catchment system, high-end "low e" windows, a tankless water heater, low-flow faucets, easily renewable bamboo flooring and a host of other energy-saving features.

"The industry is embracing energy changes throughout all of its products," said Steve Johnson, director of the Southland region for Metrostudy, a real estate information and consulting firm. "And California has been a leader in energy efficiency in regard to construction challenges."

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Paul Ashworth, Santa Fe Springs' director of planning, said Villages at Heritage Springs will be a welcome addition to the city.

"It will bring in some move-up housing, and it just expands the range of housing types for our community," he said. "We're very pleased that the developer incorporated energy-efficient aspects into the development of the homes. It's the environmentally aware thing to do, but it will also add attractiveness to potential buyers because of the long-term costs savings."

Comstock Homes, which now owns the property, faced some challenges in putting the Villages project together, according to Ashworth.

"The land was owned by a large number of different private owners, and one of the challenges leading up to the development was assembling those individual parcels into one piece of developable land," he said.

The Villages at Heritage Springs groundbreaking and official Information Center opening will be at 1p.m. Saturday at 12350 Telegraph Road in Santa Fe Springs.

Construction is scheduled to begin in June with completion of the first phase expected in January 2010.

Tabassom Ayazi, vice president of Comstock Homes Sales and Marketing, said energy efficiency should be an integral part of the homebuilding process.

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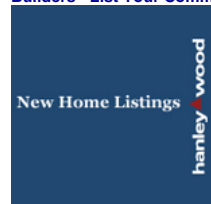
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