

# Development's plan: 7,500 'energy neutral' homes in Austin

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By **Shonda Novak** - American-Statesman Staff

A development that promises to bring 7,500 energy-saving homes to Central Texas is beginning to take shape in northeastern Travis County.

Situated off Texas 130, about 3 miles south of Manor, construction is scheduled to start soon on the first 237 homes at Whisper Valley, developer Taurus of Texas said.

Taurus officials said the project is the

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Taurus officials said the project is the first large single-family housing development, locally and nationally, that will be "energy neutral," with homes designed to produce as much energy as they consume on a net basis every year.

The homes will be equipped with geothermal pumps for heating and cooling; roof-mounted solar panels; energy-efficient appliances; and other green-building technologies, Taurus said.

That means they could achieve the "net-zero," or carbon neutral, standard Austin has set as a goal for all new homes built within the city limits from 2016 forward. Austin has set a 2050 target to reduce carbon emissions to zero for all buildings and houses.



Whisper Valley, 09.08.15 📷

"This is a significant undertaking, and Austin, with its progressive carbon-emissions targets, is the perfect place to do this," said Douglas Gilliland, president of Taurus of Texas. The firm is a subsidiary of Taurus Investment Holdings, a Boston firm.

Taurus said the homes are expected to be priced between \$150,000 and \$275,000. The Austin metro area's 2015 median market value for homes was \$267,000, according to the Travis Central Appraisal District. The median

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market value for the area that includes Whisper Valley was about \$132,000, according to the appraisal district.

With Austin city leaders aiming to add more moderately priced housing, “we believe we can be a part of that solution, by offering sustainable, affordable homes” in one of the city’s preferred areas for growth, Gilliland said.

Pacesetter Homes and Homes by AVI have signed up to be the first builders in Whisper Valley. Taurus expects to announce more builders soon.

The energy-saving features in Whisper Valley’s homes will come through a partnership of several companies that are leaders in their industries.

The partners include Bosch — which will include its energy-saving kitchen appliances, geothermal heat pumps and high-efficiency water heaters in the homes — and Google Nest, which will be supplying its smart thermostats and other products.

Google Fiber also is part of the project. Google said Whisper Valley is the first project where its ultra-fast Internet service is being installed in a new housing development. Google is in the process of installing Google Fiber in a number of existing Austin neighborhoods.

In addition to the thousands of houses, townhomes and apartments, Whisper Valley is expected to have more than 2 million square feet of retail and office space once completed in phases. A second phase with about 200 homes could start next year.

Taurus’ plans to make Whisper Valley both affordable and sustainable “is a really a smart marketing approach for them,” said

Charles Heimsath, president of Capitol Market Research, an Austin real estate consulting firm.

“There really isn’t much development out there at all right now,” Heimsath said. “In order to attract people to that area, you need something different from the norm, which this is.”

Taurus said it will preserve about a third of the project for green space and trails, including a park with more than 600 acres.

Taurus bought the 2,062 acres for Whisper Valley in 2006, but bank funding dried up during the economic downturn. So Taurus and the city of Austin teamed up for a special type of financing, whereby the city issued bonds to finance highway improvements and water and wastewater lines that will serve not only Whisper Valley but other future projects.

In return, Taurus’ role was to create a sustainable development that would include energy-efficient homes to help the city meet its carbon-emissions goals.

Taurus formed a subsidiary, EcoSmart Solution LP, to develop and implement the alternative energy programs that Taurus will incorporate at Whisper Valley.

EcoSmart rounded up the companies that will be putting their energy-saving products and systems in place at Whisper Valley and, later, in other Taurus projects around the country.

Instead of having an “unpredictable” monthly utility bill, Whisper Valley residents will pay a fixed fee, averaging about \$175 a month, said Axel Lerche, CEO of EcoSmart Solution.

The monthly fixed rate covers the cost of the rooftop solar panels, a

LED-lighting package, the Bosch appliances, geothermal equipment and other technologies, along with maintenance costs.

Taurus said its approach to financing the extra costs of sustainable building technologies is a game-changer for homebuyers. The installation of energy-efficient equipment can be prohibitively costly for many builders, and those costs can make it difficult for buyers to afford to purchase energy-saving homes.

At Whisper Valley, the EcoSmart partners make the installation investment up front, Lerche said. Buyers will then pay for it over a 25-year period, through their energy savings, he said.

Sam Rashkin, chief architect with the U.S. Department of Energy's Building Technologies Office, said projects like Whisper Valley "are vital to bringing the home of the future to homebuyers today."

In addition to homeowners having a lower, fixed monthly energy bill, Lerche said Taurus will be able to price the houses more affordably because Whisper Valley's utility infrastructure costs are being paid over a 30-year period.

Joshua Rhodes, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Energy Institute and the Webber Energy Group, both at the University of Texas, said he's not aware of another large-scale U.S. residential development using geothermal energy.

"That's the novel part of this deal," Rhodes said. "That's the part I'm most excited about. I don't know of any other place in the United States that's doing that."

John Umphress, a green building and sustainability consultant with Austin Energy Green Building, said the package of energy-saving features Taurus has put together "offers the potential for very

efficient homes.”

However, he said, “it will be up to the homeowners to maximize or realize that potential” by, for example, not using excessive amounts of hot water or leaving ceiling fans on in unoccupied rooms.

“It’s really kind of common sense. But some people aren’t aware. And when you’re trying to achieve net zero, little things mean a lot,” Umphress said.

Austin Mayor Steve Adler said he is a proponent of Whisper Valley.

“It proposes moderately priced housing and advanced technology infrastructure in a part of town that needs both,” Adler said.

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