

IN THE REGION/Long Island

Debating How Green to Go

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

TO conserve energy, Southampton Town decided in July to adopt progressive building codes that would make homes more energy efficient. The larger the house, the codes stipulated, the more energy efficient it needed to be.

The sweeping amendments to the town's building code were unique nationwide in their four-tier system, each tier gaining stringency "in relation to the size of the home," said Anna Throne-Holst, the town councilwoman who sponsored the bill, using guidelines that required homes to achieve energy efficiency based on a Home Energy Rating System, known as HERS.

Several Long Island towns, including Babylon and Brookhaven, have Energy Star building requirements, but none as stringent as Southampton's, and none tied to home size, Ms. Throne-Holst said.

"We live in a community where the disparities in home size and energy consumption are enormous," she said. The legislation was intended to "put the onus on the large homes that are the big consumers to take the lion's share of the responsibility for reducing our carbon footprint."

But the thought of going that deeply green has left some builders, architects and homeowners seeing red. So the town has recently been backpedaling.

At a hearing on Sept. 9, builders and architects addressed concerns, and a "first set of revisions addressed certain practicalities that had neglected to be addressed in the first draft of the law," said Linda Kabot, the town supervisor. As originally proposed, the sliding scale required new homes, as well as substantially rebuilt ones, to get HERS scores from 84 to 95 out of 100. Scores in the 80s were achievable, builders say, with better insulation, glazed windows, tighter framing and the use of Energy Star appliances. (Obtaining a HERS score, based on Department of Energy and E.P.A. standards, involves an analysis of a home's construction plans and on-site inspection.)

But achieving the higher



GORDON M. GRANT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

CUTTING COSTS The nearly 5,000-square-foot Eastport home of Paul Welch relies on a geothermal system and solar collectors. He has paid a total of \$1,156 for electricity in the last 12 months.

scores was more problematic. Homes in Southampton are not your run-of-the-mill colonial or Cape on a 50-by-100 lot. The average-size home under construction in Southampton is about 4,500 square feet but can be as large as 20,000 square feet, said Mike Benincasa, the chief building inspector.

According to the original initiative, homes of more than 6,500 square feet needed to achieve a 95 rating. To do that, they would literally have had to go off the grid, requiring an alternative energy source like a photovoltaic system or geothermal heating to keep the lights on and the air-conditioning whirring, said William Slight, vice president of the American Institute of Architects' Peconic Chapter, who worked with the town on the new code.

The changes are to be put to a vote on Tuesday at 6 p.m. at Town Hall. They stipulate that modified construction standards would be phased in, and that implementation dates for a solar heat requirement for swimming pools would be pushed back to Jan. 1.

Most significantly, the 95 HERS mandate for dwellings over 6,500 square feet would be put off until April 1. A more attainable three-tier approach would go into effect next month,

requiring an 84 score for new homes under 3,500 square feet, an 87 score for those under 4,500 square feet, and a 90 score for those over 4,500 square feet.

The phase-in would allow the home-building industry more time to get up to speed and would provide a waiver for historic homes, Ms. Kabot said. Also, the building inspector would be given some discretion in determining whether to exempt a home from meeting the highest standard in some cases.

Still, going off the grid is technically possible — even for a home the size of a supermarket.

Last year Paul Welch, an engineer and applied physicist, designed his nearly 5,000-square-foot five-bedroom, five-bathroom cedar-shake home in Eastport to be "zero net zero." Mr. Welch received a HERS rating of 95 and, relying on a geothermal system for cooling and heating and on solar collectors, has paid a total of \$1,156 for electricity in the last 12 months.

"If we used fossil fuels to heat and cool and create electricity with no renewable energy features," he said, "we would have had to spend around \$21,000 directly from the grid for the last 12 months." He didn't skimp on any bells or whistles, either: The \$3

million house has a movie theater, wine cellar and elevator.

Mr. Welch said his home proved that "even the most wasteful Americans could have everything they want and still not use fossil fuel."

The initial four-tier energy proposal was spurred in part by the Long Island Power Authority's recent upgrading of capacity from Southampton Village through Bridgehampton to accommodate demand from new home construction. Concerns about "facing brownouts" had been "causing more rancor," said Bob DeLuca, a member of the town's green committee and president of the Group for the East End, an environmental organization. He sees the easing of the four-tier law as "an absolute about-face of what the board seemed to set out to do just a few months ago."

About 20 new houses a month are being built without the stricter energy conservation proviso, Mr. DeLuca said — so the town is "losing one of the best opportunities" to effect change "that will be on the landscape for another 100 years."

But John Barrows, a local builder and green building instructor for the National Association of Home Builders, said that factors beyond basic energy consumption levels needed to be considered in order to go fully green. They include site design, construction materials, water usage and indoor air quality.

"The problem with Southampton is they are only going after energy," Mr. Barrows said. "That is fine at the lower levels, the 84 and 87 level."

Newer alternative energy forms like photovoltaics, geothermal and wind power are "relatively expensive technologies" that may "add well over \$100,000 to the cost of a house," have "a longer payback" and conflict with existing codes.

Yet Ms. Kabot, the town supervisor, expressed confidence that high standards could ultimately be achieved. The question is how fast.

It's not as if she were trying "to be as green as a martian," she said.