



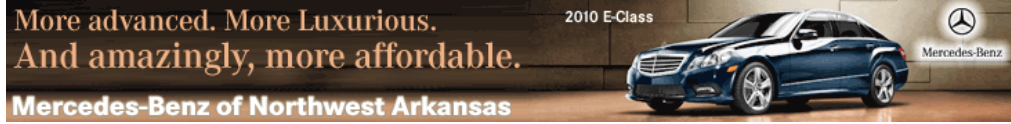
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SILOAM SPRINGS Hands-on homes don't sell, either

JBU construction management majors take on other projects

By *Evie Blad*
Sunday, November 15, 2009
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SILOAM SPRINGS — The house for sale at 506 Maci Court has perks that would have drawn quick offers a few years ago, but it has sat empty without a buyer since it was completed in the spring.

It's a common situation in a real estate market crowded with unoccupied new homes and hampered by the national recession.

But this house that won't sell is holding up more than the plans of a family ready to relocate or a builder eager to repay his loan. It's adding a hefty helping of reality to a creative class project designed to teach future home builders their craft.

The four-bedroom, threebathroom house, complete with decorative ceilings, solid oak flooring and builtin bookcases was designed, built and marketed by construction management students from John Brown University.

The student-run Eagle Construction Co. has completed a home each year for 14 years, providing free labor as a means to learn construction techniques and using profits from the sale of the home to buy tools and provide scholarships for future construction management students.

But, without a buyer for the most recently completed home, students put their home building plans on hold this year, opting instead to help build a conference center at New Life Ranch, in Colcord, Okla.

"Construction involves inertia," said Jim Caldwell, chairman of the construction management department. "They have to face the weather, the elements, subcontractors and the market. It's a valuable experience."

BUILDING HISTORY

Students constructed many of the buildings on the Siloam Springs campus, including the Cathedral of the Ozarks. It was begun in the 1940s and dedicated in 1957.

The current home building program was developed to mimic the spirit of student-led campus building projects that died out in the 1960s, Caldwell said.

To learn construction techniques, students previously designed and built cabinetry. But the experience didn't teach essential skills such as management and failed to provide practical experience for many techniques required to build homes and commercial buildings, he said.

The first student-built homes, around 1995, were small and designed for low-income families. The classes paired with local businesses, which purchased the lots and paid for materials and later sold the houses to employees.

"The thought was, we need to get out and really build actual buildings," Caldwell said. "It builds a lot of confidence. It brings reality to their education because it's hard work."

In 2005, the university purchased five lots on a cul-de-sac in a growing neighborhood, allowing students to build houses in a higher price range.

Students collaborate on the homes' design. Senior students provide management while freshmen provide much of the labor.

"It's neat being able to do the hands-on part," said senior Jeff Salowitz of Duluth, Minn.



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AN ECONOMICS LESSON

Two student-built homes next to last year's project house have sold, but a fourth won't be constructed until the university finds a buyer for the most recent project.

The delay is providing another lesson for students, who are involved in the marketing of properties, Caldwell said.

"Our Realtor's sold two or three houses in that neighborhood in the last several months," he said. "But we might just break even on this one."

Construction management students likely will graduate into a difficult climate. The national recession and local market downturn have slowed building.

There were 266 residential building permits issued in Benton and Washington counties from March to May, down from 416 permits issued in the same period of 2008, according to the Skyline Report, a quarterly survey of real estate completed by the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

The report shows just seven complete but unoccupied homes in Siloam Springs, but none of them became occupied in the quarter documented.

LARGE-SCALE PROJECT

In place of a house, 24 construction management students are providing free labor to help construct a 10,000-square-foot conference center at New Life Ranch, a Christian youth camp just over the state line in Oklahoma.

Using volunteer labor helped reduce the camp's cost from a projected \$1.8million to \$1.4 million, said Nathan Jackson, the facilities director who's supervising the project.

In exchange, Jackson helps teach skills like framing walls and running electrical lines. Some students have never held a hammer before they step on site, he said.

"Not all of them are all that experienced," Jackson said. "But that's why they're here. This is much faster than if we tried to do it ourselves."

Caldwell said the project forms a nice replacement for the Eagle Construction homes, but it lacks the student leadership that students often find valuable.

Salowitz, the senior student, said he'd looked forward to supervising a home build since he started in the program.

"It's kind of disappointing," he said. "But it's nice to see the larger, commercial side of things." To contact this reporter:

eblad@arkansasonline.com

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