

MODEL COMMUNITY: A VILLAGE THAT SAVES

Newly built 'eco-village' shows wisdom of doing things right

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Daniel P. Creighton/The Mercury
Diedra Heitzman, director of Camphill Village Kimberton Hills, explains how the artificial wetlands built to handle the sewage from the facility's new housing, seen in background, protects and recharges groundwater and treats sewage without harmful chemicals.

WEST VINCENT — When it came time to build some new housing at Camphill Village Kimberton Hills, Diedra Heitzman wanted to make sure it was done right.

“We did everything in an ecologically sound way,” said Heitzman. “I guess you could call this an ‘eco-village.’”

The rain that falls on the metal roofs, chosen so that petrochemicals from asphalt shingles will not pollute their water supply, fills underground cisterns.

That water is used for washing clothes, watering plants and flushing toilets.

Once the water gets flushed, it is treated through an artificial wetland that naturally treats the water, removes or transforms the contaminants and puts the water back into the ground.

“The plants, which are all native species, take out toxics. That’s what wetlands do very well. We have a well down-gradient of this, and it has shown no change in water quality,” Heitzman said proudly.

During dry periods, like the one the region is experiencing this year, the on-site well that provides drinking, cooking and bathing water supplements the cisterns.

One of hundreds of Camphill Villages spread throughout the world, Kimberton Hills is a 432-acre organic farming and crafts community of 115 people that practices sustainability in just about everything they do.

Heitzman is the executive director.

Kimberton Hills is also home to many adults with developmental disabilities, and they practice sustainable practices — making rugs from old blue jeans, using solar energy, growing their own food, running a bakery and café that sells that food — right alongside the other adults and families that choose to live there.



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The rain garden in the driveway in front of Camphill Village Kimberton Hills’ new buildings is more than just pretty landscaping. It is also state-of-the-art storm water management, helping rain be absorbed into the ground to prevent flooding and erosion and re-charging the community’s groundwater reserves.

Limited for years to the original 17 homes on the site, the earliest of which was built in the 1790s, Heitzman said the new housing was built for its members who were aging and wanted to retire at the place where they had lived for so many years.

“We needed to find dignified and creative ways to live with and care for aging community members,” she said.

The result was four new buildings, built entirely with sustainable features that minimize an impact on the environment.

Floors are built with bamboo instead of oak — “it took six years to grow this floor, it would take 60 for an oak floor,” Heitzman explained.

Natural light is maximized, and the arrangement of the rooms and high ceilings makes air conditioning unnecessary.

Although the solar panels on the garage — built almost entirely of “windfall wood” taken from the surrounding forest — do not provide enough power to run the entire complex, on very sunny days it does produce enough to sell excess electricity back onto the grid, Heitzman said.

Insulation in the buildings “is all cellulose, old newspapers basically; maybe even a few old Mercurys,” Heitzman said with a smile.

In the front drive, a rain garden captures storm runoff, filters it, and infiltrates it into the ground, recharging groundwater and preventing flooding and the spread of polluted run-off in area streams.

“One of the more amazing things here is that none of this was any more expensive than traditional building methods,” said Heitzman, who was intimately involved with all phases of the design.

“It came out to about \$150 per square foot, and that’s not a high price for building around here,” she said. “If you’re working with a good architect and a good contractor, you can really make it work well,” she said.

“We like to show it off,” Heitzman added. “People need to know what you can do if you put your mind to it.”