

Davidsonville firm working on inner city home of the future

By DAVID E. LEIVA Staff Writer

Why move out of the family home when the kids are all grown and on their own?

That's the question the federal Housing and Urban Development agency is asking. And it's also working to come up with an answer.

Jamie Lyons has less than a year to get blueprints developed on what could be the future of single-family homes - easy adaptation for the changing needs of residents.

Mr. Lyons, an engineer at Davidsonville-based Newport Partners, is the project manager of an initiative created by the federal agency. If successful, HUD's next step would be to sell his ideas to America - namely, builders, urban planners and consumers on a new look and feel to better-equipped homes.

"There are several facets to the work," Mr. Lyons said. "To do that in an existing home would be challenging."

PATH, a public initiative mixed with private sector interests, aims to speed up the development and use of technologies that would improve the quality, durability, energy efficiency, environmental concerns and affordability of new single-family homes.

Late last year, Newport, a building consulting firm founded in 2002, received a second round of the grant to develop affordable home models that could easily adapt to changing lifestyles and increasing techno-

logical advances under the federal agency's Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing.

This contract is worth \$347,584. The last one was valued at about \$250,000.

Carlos Martin, a researcher for HUD and the PATH project, said market research has indicated that home buyers want more of a say in the newly constructed homes they will buy.

"The market is changing in the United States," Mr. Martin said. "Before, it was about what the architect, builder and manufacturer wanted. This is a response to the market."

As soon as 2007, a prototype, 2,500-square-foot single-family home should be available, as well as a 1,600-square-foot townhouse version. The homes are expected to hit the market by 2010, Mr. Martin said.

The cost for one should run about the same for a new home today, with the hope that economies of scale will bring the price down considerably, he said.

During PATH's first phase, schematic designs for prototype homes were created that used modern technology and could be easily retooled if there's a change in lifestyle. For instance, if the five children of a family move out and leave the parents as empty nesters, the technology would allow for easier remodeling.

PATH officials are banking the success of this program on the kinds of benefits that will resonate ultimately with the homeowner. They project homes developed under the program could save 50 percent of the \$940 average household maintenance bill.

In addition, new technologies could cut also energy costs in half, to \$750 per year, officials predict. Summed up, PATH technologies would be responsible for saving nearly \$18 billion a year in energy costs, according to the group.

But before any of that happens, Newport must review current technology and those under development. In addition, there's a premium on identifying a flexible floor plan configuration.

Also, Newport is performing market research, asking builders, contractors and consumers about their perceptions of the program. In a series of questions, available on their Web site, Newport is tasked to compile and evaluate responses to assist HUD with figuring out the next steps and implementation ideas.

And while there's a chance of being on the forefront of reshaping the home paradigm, the possibility of developing the concept home could provide a great spillover, said Liza Bowles, Newport's general manager.

Ultimately, Ms. Bowles said, Newport, which has seven full-time employees, could position itself to build a reputation within the industry.

"It's certainly a large opportunity for us to get involved in something that is very innovative," Ms. Bowles said. "And with national implications with housing and the future of housing, it's very exciting."

- No Jumps-

Published January 30, 2005, [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.

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