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Home Depot Pledges \$30-Million for Green-Building Effort

By Ian Wilhelm

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The home-repair and construction company Home Depot is pledging \$30-million to help Habitat for Humanity International build affordable housing that is environmentally friendly.

During the next five years, the Atlanta corporation wants to create 5,000 homes for impoverished Americans that are energy efficient, conserve water, and have other “green” qualities.

While the effort has an environmental bent, Kelly Caffarelli, president of the Home Depot Foundation, said its primary focus is “pocketbook issues,” like reducing utility costs, for Habitat homeowners.

“The fact that there is a benefit for the environment is a wonderful by-product of it, but first and foremost we’re concerned about providing a home that is affordable over the long term for the family,” she said. “We really believe if you’ve helped a family move into a home, but they can’t afford to live in it, we haven’t done much to help them.”

While some people may see green houses as a “luxury,” especially when so many Americans are facing foreclosure, she said Habitat will add simple items, like low-flow toilets or a programmable thermostat.

To a ‘National Scale’

For Habitat, which is based in Americus, Ga., the program will help it expand its nascent environmental-building work, said Mark Andrews, the group’s senior director of U.S. operations.

“We’ve had smaller efforts in green and sustainable building, but it’s really giving us a chance to move to a national scale,” he said.

For the program, Home Depot is working with 120 local Habitat groups across the country, and others may join in the years ahead.

The housing charities will be reimbursed for each environmentally friendly home they build, with the cash awards dependent on what green standards they meet. They will get \$3,000 per house that meets the Energy Star standards set by the U.S. Department of Energy, while groups that fulfill more rigorous standards, like the ones set by the U.S. Green Building Council, will get \$5,000 per home.

The money “provides the carrot to get that final certification done and test the building to make sure it is to green standards,” said Ms. Caffarelli.

In addition, Home Depot is giving grants to eight state Habitat associations that will allow them to hire employees who can learn the various green guidelines and train builders.

Home Depot expects to provide \$50-million for charitable efforts in 2009, with the green-building effort representing about 12 percent of that. Ms. Caffarelli said the company plans to keep steady its level of cash support next year and increase how much it provides in building materials and other products.

While Home Depot and Habitat for Humanity began discussing the green program before the current recession and mortgage crisis, those problems have reinforced the need for it, she said.

“The current economic environment and the issues we’ve seen with families who couldn’t afford to live in a home they got into has just underscored the importance of our program,” she said.