

Friday, June 2, 2006

# Entrepreneur turns green thumb toward affordable housing

**San Antonio Business Journal - by Tamarind Phinisee**

A local conservationist plans to jump start her company by doing a pilot building project in the next three or four months in the San Antonio market.

Mimi Zoch, chairman and CEO of locally based LionForce Building Systems LLC, says the project will be focused on the construction of green, or energy efficient, affordable housing.

Although her company will initially focus on energy efficient, environmentally friendly affordable housing, Zoch says the company's green building method would be excellent for cold-storage, climate-control and other types of warehouses.

"We've been in the research and development phase of our company for some time," Zoch says. "We're now hoping to finish the R&D at the University of Texas engineering lab and hope to start building the pilot project (shortly)."

The final R&D phase, she says, should take about three months.

The housing will make use of walls and roofs constructed with special energy-efficient panels. Zoch says the panels are made of a expanded polystyrene that have a cement or stucco coating.

The panels, she says, are very thick and very heavy and able to withstand up to 170 mile an hour winds. In addition, she says, residents should be able to save on their utility expenses due to the energy efficiency of the panels.

"When you're talking about affordable housing, that money can make a huge difference in someone's life, be it medical, education, etc.," she says. "I always like to say this house is the house the fourth little pig would have built."

Already, LionForce has built five test houses in Kerrville. Construction on the first of those test houses, Zoch says, began in 1997. Each successive home was used to perfect the method for building energy-efficient housing.

Once the final testing on the panels has been completed, Zoch says she wants to find property for the pilot home project, as well as a contractor. The pilot project, she says, will consist of a minimum of six to eight houses under 2,000 square feet, each with possibly two or three bedrooms and two baths.

Zoch says the financing for the company has come from herself and private investors. But she says she is in the process of applying for grants for additional financial aid. To help her find property for the project as well as help the company in the affordable housing arena, she's hired Jonathan Lane, who hails from the Columbia, Md.-based nonprofit Enterprise Foundation.

### **Energy efficient city**

The only roadblock Zoch perceives to this project, she says, is getting the homes approved under the city's current building codes. If this proves difficult or causes delays, Zoch says she'll look for property outside the city's limits.

"I'd love to do something in the city. But if it takes twice as long to get started as opposed to right outside the city limits, then I'll take it outside," she says.

Mike Lopez, program coordinator for the Build San Antonio Green Program, which operates under the local nonprofit Metropolitan Partnership for Energy, says the city is looking at adopting new energy efficient codes -- called international energy conservation codes, or IECC.

Lopez's organization has been working closely with another local nonprofit, the Greater San Antonio Business Association, on the Build San Antonio green program.

In October of last year, he says, the city held the first general session for its Green Roundtable Forum to discuss adopting the enhanced energy codes. "We've gotten everybody's input and so now what we're gonna do is get back together and try to decide how to proceed with that," Lopez says.

The IECC codes may include things like ventilation requirements for clothes dryers, the best practices for attic ventilation, and air-duct sealing requirements.

City officials say the city's current building codes do not inhibit energy-efficient building. However, Barry Archer, assistant developer of services for the city of San Antonio, says the IECC enhancements being considered would be required in addition to the city's building codes for green buildings.

Whether or not the new codes would apply to everyone building houses in the future, Lopez says, is not certain.

Zoch, a native of Kennedy County, Texas, says her love for nature, the environment and also wildlife developed at a young age growing up on a ranch. She is active in a number of environmental organizations.

LionForce fell into Zoch's lap after her husband, Peter Zoch, passed away in 1998. Zoch says her husband was as a "naturalist in every sense of the word" and originally started the business in 1996. Now she says she looks forward to fulfilling the goal her husband had for the business.