

CODDING'S LATEST: WALLS OF STEEL: SONOMA COUNTY DEVELOPER FABRICATING STEEL-FRAME PANELS IN RP FOR HOMES, COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS



Published on September 8, 2007

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT PAGE: E1

Like a giant Erector set, a two-story, steel-frame house took shape this week inside a cavernous warehouse in Rohnert Park. It's the latest project of Sonoma County developer Hugh Coddling, who built thousands of homes in Santa Rosa after World War II.

His new business, Coddling Steel Frame Solutions, aims to change the way houses are built. Proponents say light steel framing is environmentally superior to traditional wood framing -- although there's plenty of disagreement on the subject. Coddling Enterprises plans to use steel framing in its Sonoma Mountain Village project, a mix of homes, retail and light industry on 175 acres at the former Agilent Technologies campus in Rohnert Park.

“We thought it was a great product to build out Sonoma Mountain Village,” said Brad Baker, chief executive of Coddling Enterprises.

Coddling also has an exclusive license from a Canadian firm, Genesis Worldwide Inc., to market the technology to builders in Northern California.

Coddling will use the 2,000-square-foot structure in Rohnert Park as a model for customers. So far, Coddling has invested \$4 million to \$5 million in the project, including the purchase of Genesis' manufacturing software, equipment and engineering services.

Steel-frame construction has been around for years, but the Genesis system makes it easier for builders to use, said Tom Chambers, chief operating officer for Coddling's steel-frame business.

At Coddling's factory in a former Agilent building, workers fabricate steel frame panels that are shipped to construction sites and assembled like parts of a puzzle.

The panels -- 11 feet tall and up to 22 feet wide -- are marked with bar codes that can be scanned on site to show where they fit. The system can be used for commercial buildings up to six stories tall.

The prefabricated panels cut construction time, a key driver of building costs, Chambers said.

Steel framing is better than wood because it's stronger, straighter and fire resistant,

Chambers said. It's also impervious to rot, mold and insect damage, he said.

There's no waste, because steel parts are cut to precise lengths, he said.

A 2,000-square-foot house can be framed with recycled steel from eight scrapped autos, saving 50 trees used in a same-size wood-frame home, according to Genesis.

But a 2004 study sponsored in part by the wood products industry says steel contributes more to global warming because of the energy used in mining and production.

Steel framing is more expensive than wood, according to a 2001 report from the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Coddling's prefabricated system cuts the cost difference, Chambers said.

“We think we're competitive with wood in terms of the final installed cost,” he said.

Currently, Coddling is using steel that's 35 to 40 percent recycled, Chambers said. “Our goal is to migrate to a much higher recycled content,” he said.

The business has about a dozen employees now but it could grow to 40 or more when Coddling expands the production process, Chambers said.

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