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'People's Choice' solar house settles at Red Wiggler

Wednesday, Oct. 26, 2005

by Susan Singer-Bart
 Staff Writer

Red Wiggler founder Woody Woodruff hovered excitedly as University of Maryland students assembled a solar house on the farm in Clarksburg Thursday.

The small house arrived early in the morning from the national mall in Washington, D.C., where it competed in the U.S. Department of Energy's 2005 Solar Decathlon.

University of Maryland civil engineering, architecture and business students worked for two years designing and building the energy-efficient, 800-square-foot house for the competition. A diverse team of men and women worked on the house, said mechanical engineering graduate student Dan Feng of Gaithersburg.

"Their life has been this house since May," Woodruff said.

Project manager Rob Murray of Bowie graduated with a degree in civil engineering in May and project supervisor Mike Boteler will graduate with a civil engineering degree in December. They and the other students devoted their full attention to getting the house ready for the September competition. They will look for jobs once the house is finished.

"I think we've got more knowledge coming out of this than anyone who's been in the construction industry for a few years," Murray said.

Eighteen teams from American colleges, and schools in Canada, Spain and Puerto Rico competed in the decathlon. Judges ranked the Maryland house eighth, but visitors to the mall considered the house, which was more finished than the others, the best, giving it the People's Choice Award.

Two years ago, when the competition was last held, the Maryland team's house finished fourth and was dismantled afterwards and sold for scrap. This year they decided to donate the house



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 Rachael Golden/The Gazette
 Project superintendent Mike Boteler, a University of Maryland student, and Woody Woodruff, executive director of Red Wiggler Farm, enter the solar house built by university students upon its arrival last week at the Clarksburg farm.

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to the Red Wiggler Foundation, which operates the Red Wiggler Farm in the Ovid Hazen Wells Recreation Park.

Murray and Boteler led a small group of teammates Thursday in unpacking three trailers filled with solar panels, beams and decking.

“They’re committed to helping get this thing back the way it was,” Woodruff said.

The house will be placed on the crest of a hill in the park, overlooking one of the last remaining sections of rural Clarksburg.

The house has solar panels on the roof tilted to the south to collect the sun and a wall of windows and glass doors on the north side. Smaller windows ring the house on three sides. Architecture students that designed the house wanted the outside to be an integral part of the house.

Hot water pipes running under the bamboo floor are encased in cement, helping to keep the house cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

“Concrete is really slow to react to temperature changes,” Murray said.

The house generated enough electricity on the mall to run a small electric car, he said.

“We’ll be selling power back to Allegheny [Power Co.],” Woodruff said. “Hope it can pay [to run] computers and lights in the barn.”

The house should also generate enough electricity for the Red Wiggler office and its kitchen once it is built, Woodruff said.

The house has donated state-of-the-art appliances, triple-pane windows, fixtures and a built-in sound system.

The living room and kitchen are painted a cheerful pale yellow, the bedroom a calming blue.

Students raised and spent more than \$150,000 on the house, but it is easily worth more than \$500,000, Murray said.

“It could be mass produced with tweaking,” he said.

Once the foundation is poured, a septic field drilled and the house hooked up to public water, it will become the energy-efficient home of a Red Wiggler staffer. It will replace an old tenant house that was in poor condition and had to be removed.

Woodruff will be the first tenant.

Tenants will pay a small rent, enough to pay for maintaining the house and its solar panels.

“We’re committed to keeping the architectural integrity as it was displayed on the mall,” Woodruff said.

The Red Wiggler Foundation has a long-term lease with the county to farm 10 acres in the northeast edge of the 295-acre park. The foundation, which is named for the red wiggler worm, is a nonprofit organization created to provide vocational agricultural training to adults with developmental disabilities.

The Wells family gave the farm to the county with the stipulation that it be preserved as open space, he said.

“This farm is missing animals,” Woodruff said. “Our old farm used to have chickens.”

A flock of chickens will make the farm feel more like a farm, but they cannot have animals without someone on the farm around the clock, he said.

“Animals are integral to any diverse farm. ... It’s an appropriate activity and chores for our

growers," Woodruff said.

Red Wiggler received donations of \$40,000, including a matching grant from the Jerome S. and Grace H. Murray Foundation of Owings, Md., to pay for the septic field and foundation. Northstar Foundation of Frederick is donating labor to pour the foundation.

Woodruff hopes he can move into the house before the end of the year.