



The Huntsville Times

Basements growing in popularity

Sunday, July 27, 2008

By ANNA THIBODEAUX
For The Times htimes@bellsouth.net

Local homeowners are catching on to the 'deep' benefits

If you want more square footage, you might want to go down under.

We're not talking about Australia here; this deep subject is about a basement. Homeowners have caught on to the idea, according to two area builders who report growing demand for basements in the Huntsville area.

Antioch Homes owner Roger Sweeney says, "Our concentration and specializing in basement walls has increased our sales by 50 percent. We have set Antioch Homes apart ... by offering this product on all of our homes and by acquiring some of the best walk-out basement lots in the most desirable locations."

Sweeney says he first observed requests for basements about five years ago, but that number has quickly grown. Along with the influx of new people with the military base realignments (BRAC) into the area also came an increasing demand for basements, which he believes the newcomers typically had at their former residences. Of every three houses he builds, one of them includes a basement. All of his full-plan, two-story Ranchers include a full basement.

"The basement trend will absolutely continue," he says. "They offer twice the square footage of the main level of the home. They are a built-in storm shelter and one of the 'greenest' products in finished living space."

This is partly true because basements are cost-effective square footage, says John Allen, president of the Huntsville-Madison County Builders Association and owner of Southern Construction & Design in Huntsville. While Allen could not say if BRAC people wanted them more than local buyers, it is likely many of them came are coming from a geographically sloping area where basements are common. He did say people will continue building them as long as there's land available.

Basements are always the same square footage as the main level of the first floor. In basic math, he says, if your first floor is 1,800 square feet then you end up with 3,600 square feet finished. Just take note that you'll have to add another three weeks to overall construction time if you include a basement.

Allen says basement size also depends on lot slope, as well as cost.

In pricing, Sweeney says Antioch charges slightly more than half the price of the main level and they finish the basement in the same finish as the upper floors. Also, he says this space is economical to heat and cool because basements stay 65 to 75 degrees year round.

"If you find a plan that you really like," he says, "but it does not have an extra bedroom, study, large play area, workout room, dance room, full bathroom or teenager area, by adding a basement, you can then have one or all of these."

Historically, the Huntsville area's red clay soil made it difficult to build basements. Allen says the area challenges in building them are structural support of retained earth mass, water infiltration and a shallow rock table.

Allen says you don't need a special type land or soil to build a basement, but better structural support of soil reduces foundation costs. "The worse (the) dirt, the more cost and vice versa," he says.

Also, he says it means understanding you're not building a crawlspace or slab house, which means having extensive knowledge to overcome the challenges of building this structure.

But Sweeney says they resolve the problem by using 12-inch thick poured walls with reinforced rebar below grade for more sound construction. Sweeney says Antioch builds a "fully encapsulated" basement, meaning all four walls are below grade.

Allen says there are a few ways to build a basement.

"Traditional concrete masonry units (i.e. concrete block), poured concrete walls, cast hybrid concrete/frame walls, and also insulated concrete form walls," he says. "We prefer ICF basements for their structural and thermal superiority, as well as the fact they are easy to install, waterproof and take minimal effort to finish out the basement over the other systems. The EcoBlock ICF offers an R40 thermal wall with solid concrete and steel wall sections from 8-inch to over 20-inch wall core sections depending on strength needed. Also, they do not require any additional insulation nor furring out since this is included in this product when installed and poured out in the field."

According to Sweeney, "The best and most suitable land for basements are sloped lots to the rear of the home. This allows a 'walk-out basement' or 'daylight' basement. You will have windows and an outside door."

Allen agrees the area is suitable for basements, but the cost of one can depend on not running into too much rock subsurface that could increase costs dramatically.

As for uses for the basement, they are only limited by your imagination.

Allen says nice touches to your basement can add value overall to your house. That value is dependent "...on the level of finish out, as well as the layout and/or rooms in the basement such as a workshop versus bedroom and baths, for example."

Sweeney says he's made some with crown molding, tile floors, granite in the bathrooms, wetbars, full windows, sheetrock ceilings (finished smooth) and a separate air conditioning unit.

"Media rooms are perfect in the basement as you have concrete walls behind your sheetrocked walls," he says. "This allow great sound for movies, as well as protection from sudden storms while watching the movie."

© 2008 The Huntsville Times

© 2008 al.com All Rights Reserved.