

# The 2010 Pacesetter Awards

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By **Bruce D. Snider and Meghan Drueding**

Change is good. This is something all our Pacesetter award-winners—past and present—believe in. Constant process improvement is critical to the success of these building companies and is our chief reason for highlighting their innovations. In the past, we've run our Pacesetter Awards as a contest, with would-be winners nominating themselves in seven categories of achievement and our editorial team making the final selection of honorees. But this year, because we also believe in process improvement, we've changed the way these awards are bestowed. Our editors are still the final arbiters of what constitutes conspicuous accomplishment, and now we also are the nominating committee. For this round of awards, we sought to acknowledge innovation and leadership in sustainable custom building and shed light on the shades of meaning that constitute the label "green builder." Each of this year's Pacesetter winners interprets the term differently, applying a custom-designed set of priorities to the implementation of sustainable construction. What they all have in common is a singular devotion to the well-built house—no matter which green pedigree it ultimately may earn

## Pacesetter Robert Soens

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**Green Philosophy:** "Part of being green is the way you run your business. Being a green builder is a core part of what I want to be doing, as an individual and a business owner."

Robert Soens admits that he gets call-backs from his clients. "They call me up to tell me that their utility bills are less than they were before we doubled the size of their house." While building sustainably costs more up front, he says, "if you look at how much you lower your utility bills, it usually more than makes up for the increase in the mortgage." But while he can talk green ROI with the best of them, Soens prefers to focus on more tangible benefits: "You're living in a more comfortable house, a healthier house, a more durable house." Regarding money, he asks, "Would you rather burn it up with the utilities, or invest it in your home?"

Soens says, "I've always been kind of a tree hugger ... hunting, fishing, camping, backpacking." And that perspective colored his approach since he began building houses in 1996. "I live in the city, and I didn't like the idea of being involved in the process of urban sprawl." When the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association

announced its EarthCraft House pilot program some 10 years ago, he signed up. Today, all of Soens' remodels meet EarthCraft standards, and all of his new homes follow the LEED for Homes program. He hired an outside environmental consultant and, through conservation and the purchase of carbon offsets, achieved carbon neutrality in his business operations.

Atlanta is not a hotbed of green consciousness, Soens admits, "but over 50 percent of our clients come to us because they know our history in green building." Every client gets Soens' rap on the virtues of a tight building envelope and efficient HVAC systems. "And then we talk to them about all the options." Using EarthCraft and LEED worksheets "almost like a shopping list," he discusses the merits of water catchment, WaterSense plumbing fixtures, photovoltaics, geothermal heat pumps, and high-efficiency lighting. "I don't try to hard-sell anybody on anything," he says. "I just try to help my clients make good decisions."

Standard on every job are dozens of small, smart things that clients might never notice, such as drywall glued to every stud and waste lumber mulched on site. "It doesn't cost a dime extra to do those things," Soens points out, but they yield a better house with a gentler impact on the environment. Plus, he explains, "It's just the way I want to go about doing business. It's part of my mission."

### **Pinnacle Custom Builders**