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When it comes to choices in home siding, vinyl's not final

by Jackie DiMarzo

You just got a great deal on a not-so-new house and now you have to face the inevitable: It needs new siding — desperately.

Automatically, you might think of vinyl siding, which has dominated the market for the past 20 years. But there is an alternative to vinyl -- one that's attractive and better for the environment — fiberglass. It's a new option here on the East Coast — in fact, Just Exteriors Plus in Wappingers Falls is the first company to offer Ultrex fiberglass siding in New York state.

Marvin Windows and Doors, the Minnesota-based company that manufactures Ultrex, has been using it for 15 years, in its Integrity and Infinity lines of window and door frames, said Bruce Peter, owner of Just Exteriors Plus. Peter displayed the siding at the Home Show at Gold's Gym in March and it was a huge hit, he said. "Once someone sees this product they love it," he said.

Made from glass fibers produced from sand, 95 percent of the volatile organic compounds generated during the manufacturing of the siding are destroyed and the product itself requires low embodied energy to produce (embodied energy is the total amount of energy required to manufacture a product). Unlike polyvinyl chloride used in vinyl siding, the product is non-toxic and will not leak toxins into the soil if disposed of in landfills.



Bruce Peter, right, owner of Just Exteriors Plus in Wappingers Falls, works with Luis Albarracin on siding Brenda Sramek's home in Hyde Park.



Front view of the home.

Although most local customers are still buying vinyl, because it's a known entity, Peter said, he is certain Ultrex will soon be a more popular choice.

For example, in 2009, Peter had two customers buy the new fiberglass siding, but in the last five months, he's had five customers, so it's gaining in popularity, he said.

Brenda Sramek of Hyde Park recently had fiberglass siding installed on her 23-year-old home to replace some old pine siding that had seen better days.

“I was thinking about having it restained,” she said, “but then I talked to Bruce at the home show and fell in love with the (fiberglass) product.”

Peter took Sramek to a house on which a siding job had already been completed, and once she was able to envision what it would look like on her house, rather than only a small sample, she was able to make her decision.

Sramek said she had been looking for a new siding option for about five years and had considered fiber cement, but wasn't that thrilled about it.

While there are no statistics available to determine the energy efficiency of various siding options, Peter said the fiberglass siding, unlike fiber cement, does not conduct heat or cold and is therefore more energy-efficient. Another bonus of the new product is the fact it actually looks more like freshly painted wood than vinyl siding does.

“Wood siding has a faint, somewhat subdued wood grain to it. It's usually smooth to the touch. Vinyl is embossed and shiny and the look is, well, fake at best,” he said. “Ultrex replicates what real painted wood looks like better than anything I have seen in my 40 years in the business,” Peter said.

He recounted his first local sale in a Town of Poughkeepsie neighborhood that has strict guidelines about replacement siding — it must be environmentally friendly, no vinyl allowed.

After the crew had removed the old wood siding and was midway into installing the Ultrex, neighbors stopped by to strongly encourage the owner not to remove the original wood siding. They didn't realize the new siding was already being put on. They couldn't tell the difference, Peter said.

Sramek agreed. “Everybody that has seen it so far thinks it's wood,” she said. She chose “earthtone” from the palette of 10 colors offered. “The house sits in the woods at the end of a long driveway. It's the perfect color for the house — the color it was meant to be.”

Ultrex does cost more. While prices for vinyl vary among different contractors and companies, Peter said the fiberglass siding he installs is priced about 15 to 20 percent higher than his company's premium vinyl siding, but customers take the durability of the product into account when deciding whether to make the investment.

Ultrex manufacturer Marvin Windows and Doors maintains that the fiberglass siding has high performance characteristics, exceptional durability and long-lasting aesthetics.

“For consumers, (it) offers a beautiful, durable finish that's virtually maintenance free,” said Susan Marvin, president of Marvin Windows and Doors in Warroad, Minn. “For builders, (it) offers a material that's light, easy to work with and saves time and labor.”

Peter said, “Vinyl is losing market share in the remodeling industry. Today manufacturers are making composites, fiberglass and other non-vinyl alternatives. They see the writing on the wall, especially with the green movement.” He said his company has always tried to stay ahead of the curve and this area is no exception.

“We now offer a complete line of fiberglass windows, doors and siding. I expect to drop all vinyl lines in the next two years. They are environmentally toxic products. Our entire company is dedicated to recycling and eliminating waste.”