

Building Green Opportunities for The Home Builders Association of Bucks and Montgomery Counties

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If you remember the "energy crisis" of the 1970's then you've also experienced nearly three decades of academic-oriented discussions predicting energy-saving technologies and legislation that have promised simple solutions to our wasteful ways.

The general construction industry is currently encountering an undercurrent of change that will provide economically viable alternatives to the conventional housing industry business model.

Green, now?

Consumers, when prompted by product marketing representatives, clearly state their preference for green products and fuel-saving technologies. At the same time they are buying gas-hogging SUV's at record-breaking rates. One has to ask: is there really a marketable consumer demand for environmentally-friendly products especially when it comes to housing?

The answer lies with the Federal government's "lead-by example" green building agenda. The government's initiative is focused on the institutional building sector, but has had a major impact on the state governments. The Feds have adopted the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) system developed by the USGBC (United States Green Building Council) for rating newly

constructed buildings with regard to their impact on both our country's limited resources as well as the environment in general.

Many states including Maryland and New York have enacted the passage of legislation that provides tax credits for LEED certified buildings. Here in Pennsylvania, private groups such as the Heinz Endowments that underwrite grant programs directed toward a private green-building loan agenda, have paralleled progress at the legislative level.

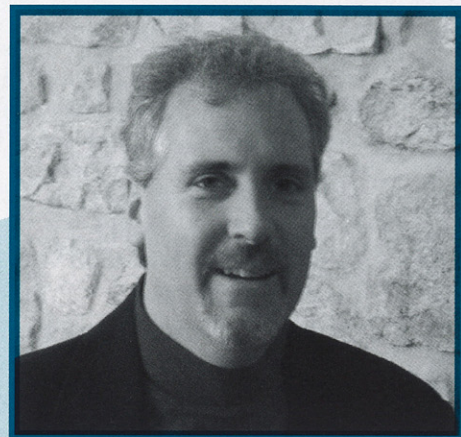
The government's green building initiative has provided a jump-start to the institutional building sector, and as intended, the momentum is spreading to other industries including market-rate, private commercial and even residential construction. In response, the USGBC is finalizing the "LEED Home" program in conjunction with Fannie Mae, the NAHB, and various public and private construction-oriented organizations.

Good news.

This green building wave will overtake the housing sector before many builders will be able to spell out LEED. Many of these changes, however are already considered accepted standards within the overall building industry. High efficiency HVAC systems that meet or exceed ASHRAE (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-conditioning Engineers) specifications, as well as insulation techniques and window efficiencies that pass the RESCheck calculations are prevalent within the market and will not require major changes to the way builders order product.

Site development "best management practices" such as open space design, building orientation, on-site storm water management, and mitigating landscape sprinklering are currently undergoing a paradigm shift. Builders that employ these "best management practices" in the planning of their communities will encounter less resistance during the approval process as townships begin to emulate the federal and state models.

Another major issue: Construction waste management, which has a major impact on our resources, is naturally creeping into the builder's daily life. Landfills that are approaching capacity (and that's most of them) are charging dumping fees that will only increase with



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time. As tipping fees rise, builders will better monitor waste and increase construction efficiency. Recycling demolition and construction waste, and the use of recycled materials will require builders to change their current practices. This concern, however is also being standardized: manufacturers and distributors are developing high-quality, LEED-certified, recycled products in order to meet the increased demand within the commercial and institutional market segments. The average homebuilder will need only to have LEED-certified recycled materials specified in their construction documents to meet the standard.

The green initiative will have a relatively minor impact on builders that are market-savvy and have dynamic operational leadership. Firms that resist what must be seen as a positive movement, or don't have the vision to enact even minimal change will find themselves falling behind new industry leaders. Ultimately, homebuilders that embrace sustainable construction practices will not only be perceived as the preferable choice by the consumer, they will also find that life just got a little easier during township planning and zoning hearings. Needless to say: spending less time in court will also help the bottom line!

References

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