

Building Department Best Practice: Provide Incentives for Going Green

Smart planning and zoning go a long way to ensuring that a community will have a desired character and usefulness into the future. But how can a community promote voluntary programs designed to reduce our impacts on the environment? Enhanced building standards can reduce energy demand, CO2 emissions, construction waste, water usage and other infrastructure requirements. However, implementation of such standards is not always without opposition; change takes time to accept, and at times, encouragement to facilitate.

Industry-established means and methods exist for both commercial and residential construction. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)(R) standards as established by the United States Green Building Council exist for commercial buildings and high-rise residential uses. Similar programs exist to reduce environmental impacts of residential buildings.

Challenge

How can a community encourage building to established standards that have proven useful in environmental, economic and social qualities of communities?

Solution

Encouragement can be by means of government mandates or changes in construction standards. However, this type of encouragement is often resented, and therefore less than effective. Communities across the United States have found that encouragement with desirable incentives are more effective, gain wider acceptance, and are longer-lasting. Incentives that require minimal initial investment by local governments may include:

- Tax Incentives
- Density Bonus
- Expedited Permit Review
- Grants
- Technical Assistance and Education

Chatham County, Georgia Board of Commissioners passed an ordinance that gives full property state and county tax abatement for any building achieving LEED Gold certification for the first five years, then tapering off by 20% each year until the tenth year.

Arlington County, Virginia allows commercial projects and private developments earning LEED Silver certification to develop sites a higher density than conventional projects. The County also encourages builders of new single-family homes to incorporate energy efficient and other green building components in their projects. The County offers "front-of-the-line" plan review, site signs, and publicity to program participants who achieve a given number of points, as outlined by Arlington's Green Home Choice program.

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Gainesville, Florida requires all government county buildings be LEED certified. Additionally, the county is providing a fast-track building permit incentive and a 50% reduction in the cost of building permit fees for private contractors who use LEED.

Cincinnati, Ohio passed an ordinance that sets aside funds from the Community Development Block Grant to provide financial assistance for builders of new residential or rehabilitated low-income or mixed-income structures and homes that meet LEED standards. Funds would be used to offset any increased costs from building to LEED standards.

Pennsylvania legislature amended the Public School Code to provide a financial incentive to public school districts that achieve LEED Silver certification.

Role of the Building Department

As the primary public interface and enforcement body of the Building, Mechanical, Electrical and Plumbing Codes, building departments will play an important role in overseeing any new green or sustainable building measures for public and private sector development. Building departments should provide adequate funding for staff training or to obtain services from an outside source on an as-needed basis to facilitate expeditious review of qualified projects and to verify compliance with enhanced building standards and/or incentive program requirements.

Benefit

The benefit of voluntary implementation of higher building performance standards will translate into tremendous environmental benefits: energy savings, CO₂ reduction, drinking water savings, waste/storm water reduction, construction waste reduction and more.