

# Green building goes mainstream in region

## Consumers expect higher standards of industry

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BUSINESS TO BUSINESS

### HICKORY

Not long ago, the concept of “green” home building conjured images of either maverick environmentalists or affluent consumers looking for trend-setting ways to distinguish their custom homes.



Glaze

Opting to build a green home entailed compromised amenities and/or significant additional up-front construction costs. Building green was a niche market to which few builders could afford to cater. Today, green building has

gone mainstream due to broader market demand, more widely available “green” materials, and more definitive building industry standards.

So what does building green really mean?

“Until recently, defining green building was kind of like defining organic food,” says builder Gene Glaze of Glaze Construction.

“Consumers had to basically trust the label, without really understanding what’s behind it.”

“It was relatively easy for a builder to ‘greenwash’ a home for appearances sake,” adds builder Rob Howard of Home Energy Solutions. “That’s harder to do now that consumers are savvier and builders are adopting new, more rigorous standards.”

Both Glaze and Howard are members of the Hickory-Catawba Valley Homebuilders Association. Late last year, Howard championed formation of the association’s Green Building Council, while at the same time the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) was formalizing a new ANSI-compliant green building standard.

The official standard is accompanied by voluntary guidelines designed to offer innovative, resource-efficient building techniques, while preserving affordability. Predecessors to the NAHB program include Energy Star, which while fairly rigorous is focused on energy efficiency in



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Randy Bowman (left) and Rob Howard of the Homebuilders Association Green Building Council are shown at a meeting.

consumer products. In contrast, current definitions of green building include a far broader spectrum of environmental impacts such as land development, water efficiency, indoor air quality and global precious resource consumption.

The U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification is considerably more comprehensive than Energy Star, but more difficult and costly to attain.

Interestingly, LEED does not require meeting Energy Star requirements.

“The new NAHB guidelines show how builders can do a tremendous amount to make homes more environmentally friendly, without pricing beyond reach of the average homebuyer,” Howard says.

And unlike LEED, even the lowest level of the NAHB standard includes Energy Star compliance.

North Carolina and the Catawba Valley region are particularly proactive and innovative when it comes to embracing environmentally sound construction. Several years ago, the

local Habitat for Humanity affiliate pioneered and built one of the first “zero cost energy” homes in the state under Howard’s guidance. The Catawba County school system recently announced that its new Snow Creek elementary school would be built to LEED standards. And local builders like Glaze are educating themselves and becoming certified in green building techniques and standards. Glaze recently renovated a building on Hickory’s Union Square rather than build a new structure from scratch for his office.

“If done properly, renovation exemplifies green building philosophy,” he points out.

“You’re not consuming new land, you’re reusing many of the structural and functional components, and upgrading a once underutilized building into one that’s productive and resource-efficient.”

Howard emphasizes that green building is a market-driven phenomenon, not a frivolous marketing ploy.

The critical thing is that both builders and buyers be able to go green at price points appropriate to

their means.

Buyers want their homes to be genuinely green to some extent, and builders are finding that the gap between green and affordable has narrowed. The NAHB standard and guidelines offer three successive levels of green building compliance: bronze, silver and gold.

“Meeting the bronze level requirements is attainable by any quality builder, and affordable for an increasing portion of the buying public,” says Glaze, who is currently building town homes expected to be bronze level compliant.

When headlines are dominated by the national housing slump, it’s easy to miss burgeoning trends that may explode once the storm is over.

“Smart builders aren’t wasting time wringing their hands during this slow period,” Howard says. “They’re educating themselves to gain a competitive advantage once the industry picks up.”

Failure to appreciate the market demand for green building might become a serious liability in the not too distant future.