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LEEDing the green home initiative: Will local zoning incentive support growth?

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In 2008, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) launched a green home certification program known as LEED (or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for homes. One goal of the USGBC is to transform the way homes are designed, built and operated, enabling an environmentally and socially responsible, healthy, and prosperous environment that improves quality of life. However, very few new homes are being built green. According to the National Association of Home Builders, in 2011 there were over 602,000 housing starts. A "housing start" is defined as excavation (ground breaking) for the footings or foundation of a residential structure. Although not all housing starts are seen through to completion, most are. From 2008 through 2011, the National Association of Home Builders reports 2,655,600 housing starts. Since launching LEED for homes in 2008, the USGBC has verified 20,000 LEED homes. When comparing 20,000 LEED certified homes to the 2,655,600 housing starts between 2008 and 2011, the numbers are disturbingly imbalanced.

LEED for homes certification ensures that the newly constructed home is energy efficient and environmentally friendly because it is verified by an independent third party. A LEED certified home is awarded points towards its certification by implementing methods to conserve energy, reduce water use, and improve indoor air quality. In addition, LEED awards points for utilizing a site that will further smart growth principles by choosing locations in close proximity to community resources and transportation. Points are also awarded for avoiding previously undeveloped or environmentally sensitive sites. The project will also be awarded points if the project team chooses its materials and resources carefully, giving priority to locally produced and salvaged materials. It is also imperative to utilize products that will assist in the reduction of toxic fumes emitted by paints, stains, and adhesives in the home. The most important step in building a LEED certified home is the design and budgeting stage. By assembling a project team knowledgeable about green building techniques and the LEED certification process, goals can be established that will keep the builder within the allotted budget.

A common misconception is that building a green home will cost more than building a non-green home. "There is no significant difference in average costs for green buildings as compared to non-green buildings." According to the USGBC, over 50% of LEED certified homes also qualify as affordable housing, which clearly demonstrates that energy efficient and environmentally friendly homes can be constructed while staying within a strict budget that is profitable even with affordable housing restrictions placed on those homes.

In my opinion, the only explanation for the imbalance between green and non-green homes is that contractors believe building green will cut into their profit margin, which is similar to concerns contractors had in the past with affordable housing projects in Connecticut. However, the Connecticut legislature has now persuaded Connecticut contractors to pursue affordable housing

projects in the State by providing incentives that shift the permitting process in their favor.

Until certain affordable housing thresholds are satisfied, the Connecticut General Statutes 8-30g affordable housing incentive permits developers to propose an affordable housing project in any zone within the municipality, and it may be turned down only if it presents a risk to the health and safety of the public. In an 8-30g application, the burden of proof is on the local Planning Commission to explain why such a development should be turned down rather than on the developer to prove that it complies with local regulations. Section 8-30g has been extremely successful in increasing the number of affordable housing projects throughout the State.

It is not necessary to go as far as the legislature did with C.G.S. 8-30g, because a green home in the neighborhood is not likely to attract the same opposition as an 8-30g affordable housing proposal. However, if local zoning regulations were to relax their often stringent coverage, setback, story, and height restrictions for green home construction projects, then more and more developers would consider building green homes. Once a developer builds its first green home, they will likely discover that a green home can be constructed for the same cost as a non-green home.

It took almost four years for LEED to certify its 20,000th home, but with local incentives aimed at relaxing zoning restrictions which already cut into a builder's profit margin, the number of green homes is certain to increase rapidly.

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