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Fall 2013, do we believe recovery is finally here? New England continues to lead in this recovery

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As a member of the National Association of Home Builders, each fall I have the opportunity to meet with some of my peers from throughout the country. The board of directors and the members of its numerous committees meet 3 times a year and spend 4 days conducting the business side of the NAHB. Being a part of this group has allowed me to be better educated and informed on what goes on in the building industry. This networking opportunity to learn what other design and construction professionals are doing, the trends in design, levels of business activity from across the country is amazing. I always return feeling refreshed and invigorated from these meetings with new ideas and valuable information.

One meeting I attend is the design committee. It consists of several design professionals who set up awards programs, design educational opportunities for the annual convention and review government policy as it relates to development and building.

Some design trends identified this year include creative use of windows. This does not mean lots of windows or crazy custom shapes but involves the use of standard size windows in varied combinations or specific windows in special locations. Ideas such as high windows to let in light or sky views but strategically placed to provide privacy, windows paired with transoms, or in more interesting configurations. Another new trend is the moving away from simple monotone browns and neutrals in exterior colors. The mixing of exterior materials gives new life to the building exteriors and provides texture and depth creating plays of light and shadows. More details for both exterior and interior are a huge desire and trend. These add interest and a sense of quality. We are not talking about just adding shutters, but real details, such as open rafter tails, elaborate porch posts, walks of pavers or stone, lighting used to highlight features and create a sense of arrival, items which make a building more unique or fit its regional style more closely. Interiors are shifting as well with the open floor plan moving to a new level of refinement. The kitchen is now the center of living and is being articulated with multi-purpose islands for work, study and eating. Islands that have storage at one side, different levels of surfaces and combining several materials are becoming more common. The islands are getting larger with these additional uses. Trends of where we live are changing as well. We all hear of the urban influx, young people and empty nesters flocking to the city where transportation is easier, walking is normal and life has more opportunities for eating, playing and entertainment. Empty nesters and retirees are not straying far from their present homes either, preferring to stay close to their children and grandchildren. Multi-generational housing is on rise, especially for the close in suburbs. Speaking of suburbs, contrary to what many were predicting, the suburb seems to have a new life as young people are starting families and realize they want yards and better schools which are found in the suburbs. This is driving another trend where small downtowns are attracting new business as the people leaving the city look for more of

the services and restaurants they enjoyed as part of their urban lifestyle.

As I learned there is much happening on the government regulation front as well. The National Association of Home Builders is working hard to prevent things like expansion of jurisdiction surrounding vernal pools and wetlands as agencies look to increase buffer zones and areas of review. The changes to building code seem to go one continuously to the point where none of us can keep track. The builders are at Public Comment sessions for code changes and recently got struck down proposals for additional drafts stopping in residential attics, additional inspections during the building construction, expansion of use of fire sprinklers, reduction of allowable window areas, requiring all buildings to provide roof area setup for solar installation and preserved prescriptive methods to comply with energy codes for renovations.

Other topics covered include new ways to fund development through bonds and potential of crowd funding as a source of new capital. Talks by leading national economists of industry health and outlooks and sources for latest information on demographics which affect our industry. All in all the meetings highlight many trends in regulations, business climate and design which are on the horizon.

So where are we here in New England in the overall picture? We should be happy to be here from a business standpoint. New England and especially Massachusetts continues to lead in this recovery. We have good infrastructure in the transportation area, specifically public transportation, good job prospects in the higher paying industries and innovation creating new opportunities. We have seen a sustained growth in business and if you look around you see activity in most segments of business. This may be a time when we can say things are looking good.

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