

Getting The Green Light

Traditional Environmental Rivals Now Work Together On 'green Building' Projects

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What a difference a decade makes.

Ten years ago, opposition to the Monona Terrace Convention Center sputtered to a halt as ground was broken for the center and lawsuits filed to stop its construction were dismissed. The conflict was the last stand of a long war between the Madison area's pro-development and anti-development lobbies over construction projects that included the South Beltline and Madison Area Technical College.

Today, environmental groups that may have opposed those developments of the past are working closely with builders, advising them on how to minimize the environmental effects and energy consumption of their home and commercial building projects.

The green building movement is uniting these groups that are traditionally at odds over construction projects, and it's changed how development proceeds in the region.

More than 1,000 homes statewide, most in the Dane County area, are expected to be certified this year as Green Built by the Wisconsin Environmental Initiative. That number has risen steadily since 1999, when 30 homes were certified. Last year, the program certified 792 homes.

Thirteen of 31 builders whose homes were featured in this year's Madison Area Builders Association Parade of Homes, which wraps up today, used green building practices.

The Green Built program evaluates homes in 10 areas such as siting and land use, materials and energy efficiency. Builders must earn at least 60 points for homes to receive the designation. The Wisconsin Energy Star program also evaluates homes and designates those that achieve a certain level of energy efficiency, and the U.S. Green Building Council certifies homes through its LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program and products through its Green Seal program.

"What's happening is the awareness of green building on a national scale," said Nathan Engstrom, Green Built program director for the Wisconsin Environmental Initiative.

Sonya Newenhouse is president of Madison Environmental Group, which helped implement environmentally sensitive waste management during construction of the Overture Center for the Arts.

"I think the community is doing a good job letting developers know what kind of community they would like," she said. "(Developers) are making it happen. They're building their dreams."

Cooperation a fairly recent phenomenon

Newenhouse's cooperative relationship with developers would have been unheard of during the bitter construction project battles of the 1970s and 1980s. But the shift didn't occur overnight.

Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, who had opposed the Beltline when she was a state public intervenor in the 1980s, played a role in bringing developers and environmental groups together. A watershed event was supported by real estate agents and builders for a 1998 referendum to preserve land for conservation.

"People want to do what is better for the collective good, and they find it useful when they also can save money," Falk said. "I've never been one who thought you changed people's motives, but you can change how they act by giving them reasons to do something different."

Brett Hulsey of the Sierra Club said some builders are responding to market pressure in promoting the green building concept.

"We sort of quit arguing and started working on solutions," he said. "Our whole focus right now is building better communities that include existing and new development."

Builders aren't adopting green building practices just because they want to be environmentally responsible, said Eric Truelove, director of sustainable design services for Renschler Co. of Madison, which recently sponsored a seminar for builders titled "Building Green, Operating Green."

"It's not about the environment anymore," he said. "It's trying to do it smart to increase the green in your checkbook."

Dollars-and-cents benefits of commercial green building practices, Truelove said, are improved indoor air quality, which increases employee productivity and avoids lawsuits, as well as reduced energy costs. Homebuyers also get these benefits, while builders gain the marketing advantage of offering energy efficient and environmentally friendly homes.

Truelove said awareness of green building practices was late in coming to Madison area. Green building became popular during the 1990s on the coasts and in Chicago due to higher population densities.

"Madison is behind the curve," he said. "The important thing is it encompasses more than the building itself. The idea with green building is not only to have a building that is environmentally friendly, but also an asset to the community."

Big, small builders embrace green techniques

A local green building pioneer was Don Simon Homes, which started implementing environmental standards for its homes in 2000 and carried on the practice when it merged with Midland Builders to become Veridian Homes, the state's largest home builder. Veridian plans to start 675 homes this year, and all will be both Green Built and Energy Star certified.

"It was a conscious decision for us to lead the pack and set an example for our industry," said David Simon. "In our case, it was making a decision to do the right thing."

But Veridian Homes wouldn't be following the standards if it wasn't good business.

"I think it's profitable just for our reputation as a builder, but we've also reduced the cost to the consumer," said Simon, estimating about 30 percent of home buyers now seek out the company because of its green-building reputation.

Smaller builders also are embracing the green building concept. Tom Olson of Builders Alliance in Viroqua sponsored an open house in Baraboo recently with four homes he said were built with a construction process that makes them stronger and reduces waste.

"This is the ultimate in Green Built construction," he said. "It reduces energy costs by over 50 percent. We send a whole house out on less than one semi - and nothing goes into the Dumpster."

Habitat for Humanity of Dane County certifies all of its homes in the Green Built and Energy Star programs.

"We're real proud of the fact that we can do it and still keep them affordable for low-income families," said executive director Brian Miller. "It's important for us to build high-quality homes."

Green building isn't limited to homes. It's spreading to commercial office buildings and other projects. A new city water utility building on East Olin Avenue was constructed with a green design.

Madison's greenest structure may be an eight-story apartment building planned on West Washington Avenue by developer Eric Minton.

The \$12 million building will have retail stores on the ground level, a two-story health and fitness center, a rooftop park and community center, medical offices on the fourth floor and four stories of efficiency to two-bedroom apartments with rents ranging from \$500 to more than \$1,000 a month. The developer isn't applying for tax incremental financing, said spokesman Michael Quigley.

Tenants will be encouraged to participate in EnAct (Environmental Action Teams), a Madison Environmental Group program, in which their energy use will be monitored.

"In one building, we can monitor, literally, people's behavior," Newenhouse said.

Quigley said the program will be voluntary, but "I think that people will be wanting to live here because of these features."

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