



The Role of Code Officials in Green Building Program Administration

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Most code officials currently think of themselves primarily as stewards of building safety. Soon, however, some may carry an additional significant responsibility: serving as stewards of the environment. In fact, by administering local green building programs, some pioneering code officials are doing this already.

Because code officials are already experts at evaluating building components, they may be best positioned to efficiently evaluate components with regard to green and sustainable building provisions as well. For example, in enforcing the prescriptive requirements of the *International Building Code* or *International Residential Code* for wood frame construction, a code official might be concerned with whether the header over a window opening is properly sized and fastened. Code officials responsible for administering green building programs may also be concerned with whether the lumber for the header comes from sustainably managed forests, whether engineered lumber is used to save material resources, and whether waste produced by cutting the header down to size is recycled and diverted from landfills. If an inspector is already in the field evaluating components of the building envelope for general code compliance and he or she is also capable of analyzing green features, the number of trips to the job site may be cut in half and the time spent to actually locate and inspect each item reduced as

well. Similar time and cost savings may also be possible during the plan review process.

The added responsibility of administering a green building program, however, may create additional burdens on local building departments. If we are to preserve the progress we have made to date in building safety, it is not reasonable to simply add to the list of responsibilities of existing code officials, most of whom find their time entirely consumed by current duties. Arguably, the best way to ensure that the enforcement of safety-related requirements is not compromised may be to hire additional personnel to help shoulder these additional responsibilities. Alternatively, some of this workload could be transferred to independent consultants. Either way, many new green building-related jobs are likely to be created. It would be very unfortunate if green building programs and standards were adopted or initiated by jurisdictions, only to find that they do not have funds available to hire the additional personnel necessary to verify compliance with those programs and standards. The result would be a program in name only and would accomplish little in reality.

There are other alternatives to in-house administration of green building programs. For example, the developers of some of the most popular green building rating systems offer third-party administrative services. In fact, many green building rating

systems only function in that manner and do not allow administration by local building departments.

Where a jurisdiction bases its requirements on such a program, the administrative duties of the local building department are typically reduced to coordination with the third-party administrator. Some other programs allow an arrangement wherein code officials may act as local “verifiers” or on-site inspectors for certain specific provisions.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system for new construction (LEED-NC), which is the most popular green building rating system for commercial buildings, including residential buildings more than three stories in height, is now typically administered by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) only. In 2009, however, USGBC intends to significantly alter its administration and certification procedures, decentralizing many of these responsibilities.

The ICC 700 *National Green Building Standard*, which is applicable to all residential occupancies, is intended to be administered by any



adopting entity, including governmental jurisdictions, green building programs or other third-party compliance bodies. Similarly, American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers/USGBC/Illuminating Engineering

Society of North America 189.1, *Standard for High-Performance Green Buildings Except Low-Rise Residential Buildings*, is specifically intended for adoption and administration by governmental jurisdictions. In addition, some jurisdictions have created their own “home grown” green building programs or have based their local programs on other regional initiatives, and the Green Building Initiative intends its Green Globes commercial green building rating system be utilized on a voluntary basis.

Clearly, the specific rating system or standard on which a local green building program is based can have significant implications for the building department. And whether the program is to be administered in-house or by third parties may also have a significant effect on the future responsibilities of many code officials. Fortunately, code officials often take part in determining which national or regional green building program or standard will be used as the basis of their local program. In making their recommendation, the question of who will administer the program, and whether the rating systems and/or standards under consideration support administration by the desired party, should be carefully evaluated.

When code officials are involved in the process of selecting a green building program, they are able to exercise a measure of control over their own destiny. Some code officials and building departments may desire the additional control and potential cost effectiveness afforded by administering the program themselves, while others may prefer to let third parties shoulder that burden. ♦