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Green Building Barrels Into the Mainstream Market



The Cantu-Vasquez Family is ready to move into a new energy- and resource-efficient home courtesy of the Wisconsin Green-Built Home program, which was honored as Program of the Year at the NAHB National Green Buildings Awards.

After several years of slow but steady growth across the country, the green home building movement — which applies innovative and environmentally sensitive construction techniques and products to reduce energy and water consumption and improve residential comfort and safety — is barreling into the mainstream, according to a survey of NAHB members in late January and early February by the association and McGraw Hill Construction.

Preliminary results released during NAHB's Green Building Conference in Albuquerque, N.M. on March 12-14 showed that there was a 20% increase in 2005 among those in the home building community who are focusing their attention on green building issues and that their ranks are expected to increase by another 30% this year.

"Green home building is at a tipping point among the builder population," said Harvey Bernstein, vice president of Industry Analytics and Alliances for McGraw-Hill Construction. "The data indicates 2006 to 2007 is the time frame from which the builder population moves from a majority less involved to more involved with green building."

Ray Tonjes, chairman of the NAHB Green Building Subcommittee, noted that the study opens new ground and new business opportunities for NAHB members. "NAHB has been in the vanguard of the voluntary movement to increase the efficiency and quality of the American home," he said. "This study suggests a viable path for the home building community to educate the public about green building and deliver a product that responds to the needs of the buyer as never before."

Bernstein predicted that green building will boost its market share from \$7.4 billion and 2% of housing starts last year to \$19-\$38 billion and 5%-10% of residential construction activity in 2010. "Within 10 years, everybody's going to be building green," he said.

According to the survey results, the leading reason that builders are considering green is that "It's the right thing to do," Bernstein said, an indication of the industry's strong links to the community. Of those polled, 92% identified this factor as a very or somewhat important influence behind the decision to go green. Other prominent influences include: lowering lifecycle costs, such as energy efficiencies and productivity increases, 87%; staying ahead of the competition, 82%; expanding business with customers who are interested in green building, 82%; and limiting exposure to liability on such issues as water leaks and mold, 78%.

The leading factors triggering building firms to expand their green home building activities were identified in the survey as: increases in energy costs and utility rebates, 88%; consumer demand, 88%; superior performance, 87%; codes, ordinances and regulations, 86%; and competitive advantage, 83%. Starting costs and the unwillingness of consumers to pay additional costs for a green home were identified as the leading obstacles to firms becoming involved in green home building, rated as important by 82% and 79% of those surveyed, respectively. Also important were: uneducated consumers, 79%; codes, ordinances and regulations, 72%; and a lack of awareness among consumers of green products, 70%. Only 39% said that the perception of green building as a fad and not something here to stay was a significant obstacle.

Asked to indicate the importance of specific green home building options, NAHB members participating in the survey identified high-efficiency HVAC equipment as the top item, with 92% responding that it was important. That was followed by low E-glass windows, 89%; HVAC for indoor air quality, 90%; more energy-efficient appliances, 88%; reduced air infiltration, 86%; hi-performance engineered wood products, 84%; above-code energy programs, 82%; the minimization of site disruption, 82%; water-saving utilities such as dish and clothes washers, 75%; storm water mitigation, 74%; formaldehyde-free finishes, 73%; and water-conserving fixtures and faucets, 73%.

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- Other highlights from the survey findings: Upgrading to green building increased the total cost of a project by an average 10.6%. However, for builders active in green building, the perceived cost increase was an average 8.7%, compared to an average of 11.1% for those not involved.
- Green building certification programs have yet to take hold in the residential market; only 3% of respondents said they were certified and 80% said they were not. Nevertheless, 80% of builders starting 10 homes a year or less and 71% of those starting more said they would be interested in participating in voluntary green home building certification.
- Ninety-five percent said they were using green friendly building materials; 80% reported using OSB rather than plywood; 79% said they were using engineered wood such as Tgi and glulam as an alternative to dimensional lumber; and 54% said they were reducing their construction waste.
- Eighty-nine percent responded that they were doing something to preserve natural open space; 67% said they were minimizing disruption to existing vegetation; and 64% said they were preserving natural water drainage ways.
- Eighty-eight percent said they were taking steps to reduce air filtration in their homes; 77% were using high-efficiency HVAC equipment to achieve this; and 58% said they were using overhangs.
- Unlike commercial builders, home builders were able to readily name leading brands of green products in various categories: 80% were able to name a brand in the house wrap category, where Tyvek was most frequently named (66%); 76% knew an insulation brand, 29% naming Owens-Corning; 75% were able to name a door and window brand, 15% citing Andersen and 11% Pella; 70% named an HVAC brand, 17% Trane and 12% Carrier; and 67% knew a wood framing brand, 13% Trus joist, 9% TJI and 8% Boise Cascade.

Bernstein said that his staff was busy compiling the survey data right up to the Green Building Conference, and a final report should be available in roughly the next couple of months.

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