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OFF THE GRID/HIGH SIERRA ENERGY SUMMIT

HANGING ON THE LEED-ING EDGE

“Green building” may be visible on the horizon, but are we really there yet?

By Geisel

“It’s rather like trying to nail jello to a tree,” said ETech consultant Hank Jackson during his opening remarks at the High Sierra Energy Summit’s first full-on classroom session, “Green Building: Help or Hype,” Monday, Aug. 11, at Cerro Coso College.

Jackson’s analogy, drawn from his North Carolina heritage, refers to the lack of definition available to terms such as “green building” and “sustainable design” even as we bat them around in our modern lexicon. Still, Jackson, whose background includes an degree in aerospace engineering and 25 years of teaching and technical instruction in building technology, has been tracking the state of both topics for decades and knows it, or what there is of it, like the backwoods of his Weaverville hometown.

His class gave the diverse mix attendees, including Town code inspectors and even a realtor, a pretty thorough overview of building and sustainability, as well as the ups and downs of what goes into LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. Jackson’s overriding thrust, though, was, “Is all this Help or Hype?” The answer: a little of both, actually.

As Jackson pointed out up front, there are lots of questions that, decades later, still have no definitive answers. Governments are taking on some, while others are being left up to the private sector to figure out. “In a sense, we’re still in the same place we were 30 years ago,” he said. “There were some good ideas early on, and some that ‘sounded good’ at the time, many pitched by hypesters and ‘snake oil salesmen. It’s taken us a long time to get to this latest jumping off point.”

Basically, Jackson said, “Sustainability, or green building, is a philosophy that exists on a continuum — it has no single definition.” We’re still working on that, though industry and government have coined terms and established trends that will shepherd a formal definition.

WHO SAYS IT’S GREEN?

Good question. On a local level, apparently no one does. Jackson said he thinks that will likely fall to code officials, an idea already being met with resistance. Local code inspectors nationwide say they are already overwhelmed and adding green inspection to the mix means they may have to add more staff. “I’m not saying we can’t do this,” Jackson said. “We just can’t do it the way we’ve been doing it.” One sensible solution discussed with the class involved simply replacing items on an inspection checklist with newer “green” counterparts and eliminating repetitive, non-essential steps.

On a state and national level, various entities have their say in what constitutes “green” building: federally, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Dept. of Energy (DOE) and U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC); in the private sector, the

American Institute of Architects (AIA) and American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE), the latter of which has literally written much what is being used in several locales as basic code. (ASHRAE's "Standard 90" underlies much of California's Title 20 & 24, which defines minimum design requirements.) Even on the world stage, players include the 20-nation Green Building Challenge.

Since the EPA already has a relationship with the DOE and the private/public Building America energy efficiency partnership, it could well emerge as nation's baseline governmental oversight agency. The EPA already monitors green building issues and development, and serves as a clearinghouse for green building information and funding initiatives.

Meanwhile, here in California, the governor's office must work not only with its own Waste Management Board (which has a stake in recycling the state's 92 million tons of annual waste), but also many other private and nonprofit agencies.

Jackson said there might be some turf battles as these and other agencies overlap and compete for recognition, but added he's confident such skirmishes will ultimately be resolved.

LEED VERSUS GREEN GLOBES

LEED may be the big buzzword in the green building world, but it's not the only show in town. "Green Globes," based in Portland, Ore., is a competing certification process that may have certain advantages over its more notable counterpart. Jackson pointed out that certification from either one is NOT building code, which he stated employs "shall" language. Rather, they are both "ratings systems" that use "may" wording in their text.

Created by the USGBC, in just under five years LEED has been assumed by some to be the de facto standard for green building certification. It has the advantage of featuring several different for everything from renovations to new school construction, but isn't very flexible in terms of how it awards points. Green Globes, on the other hand, has recently started getting attention as a less expensive alternative to LEED. Still primarily aimed at commercial building, it offers an online evaluation process (simpler than LEED, with no tree-killing paperwork) and no loss of credit for design features that don't apply. For example, under LEED, if your building has high efficiency air conditioning in northern climates with little or no cooling loads, you get no points.

TITLE 24 AND BEYOND

California's Title 24 now impacts all new construction and remodels. As High Sierra Energy Foundation Director Rick Phelps pointed out, "Each new iteration of 24 carries new weight. What wasn't defined or mandated four years ago is mandated now."

Among other practical considerations, green buildings don't HAVE to be Green Globes or LEED certified – that, Jackson said, is a marketing function. Anything even minimally exceeding Title 24 standards can be labeled "green" or "sustainable," leaving the door open to potential hype. There is, he said, "a tremendous need for education" as to the realistic benefits and costs associated with green building. He quoted ASHRAE

Editor David Grumman, who said, “A growing need exists for hard data that reveals, ‘If you do this under green standards, you get that effect.’” Until we know more, Jackson cautioned mandating of any green standard without proper discussion and vetting will likely result in excessive costs to taxpayers and consumers.

In many cases, he indicated real estate agents and [EcoBrokers] might arguably be the first line of defense for the general public. Keeping up with trends and changes to laws such as Title 24 can be a big help to consumers needing current information about green building.

At the end of the day, Jackson said at least for the time being, this is reality: “Since green building isn’t an ‘all-or-nothing’ proposition, the builder or owner can choose how far to go and how much to spend, and anything is better than nothing.”