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New city push to make New York go green

Energy, housing crisis prompts city to address conservation

By Jen Benepe

A colleague recently recounted a joke: "We had a friend who worked in a green building, and we could always tell when he was asleep because the motion-sensitive lights would be out for hours."

Yet to date, not many green buildings have been built in New York. Although new standards have been adopted for all buildings in Boston and for low-income housing in Washington, D.C., New York City has been slow to develop any requirements, guidelines or incentives for builders to use recycled materials, plan for reduced energy use, or even provide for more natural light in buildings.

That might change with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's December declaration that the city is headed for a major energy, housing and traffic congestion crisis. To help address the problem, the mayor had several months prior created a 17-member Sustainability Advisory Board that includes Steven Spinola, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, and Carlton Brown, a developer who is chief operating officer of Full Spectrum. That board has already met more than 25 times to begin drafting the outlines of a successful energy conservation plan, said insiders who spoke on background.

The officials who have been assigned to the new board are still formulating their strategy, but changes might include creating standards for converting some older buildings into "greener" buildings, encouraging energy conservation measures, and incentivizing green building. In the next few years, "going green" could be incorporated into city building codes, added as a prerequisite for 421-a tax abatements, or even made into law.

Sources on the advisory board noted that even simple changes to the 950,000 buildings in New York -- like adding new insulation, conserving air conditioning and putting in new low-energy fluorescent bulbs that reduce electricity demand by 80 percent -- would create huge savings while costing close to nothing to implement.

Green history

In October 2005, the city passed Local Law 86, which requires new city-owned buildings to be built with at least a minimum LEED certification or preferably silver LEED status.

LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a voluntary rating and certification system developed five years ago by the United States Green Building Council.

Because of the new law, several important new structures, including the retrofitted lion's den at the Bronx Zoo and the New Sunrise Yard, a new building for the city's Department of Transportation, won green awards from a combined program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the city's Department of Environmental Protection.

But the city administration stayed away from passing what it considered were onerous requirements on developers, said one city official knowledgeable about the history.

"We have a housing crisis, building is very expensive, and we don't want to destroy housing construction in New York," said the official, who chose to remain anonymous.

State requirements are not there yet either, said developers who complained that in much of what they are doing they are like pioneers in a vast, unexplored territory. Even though New York State was the first state in the country to pass a green building tax credit in May 2000, there are still no minimum legal requirements for incorporating environmental measures in new or even existing buildings, according to Pam Lippe, president of e4 inc., a company that provides green certification consulting for builders.

But even without city and state requirements, builders are finding that prospective clients are willing to pay for the cachet of being in a green building.



The Durst Organization's One Bryant Park, which it is developing in partnership with the Bank of America.

At One Bryant Park, which the Durst Organization is developing in partnership with Bank of America, innovations in technology and materials will allow the building to be certified as LEED platinum, the first skyscraper in the world to reach that level, said Durst spokesman Jordan Barowitz.

The building will be made with recycled materials and with fly ash -- a byproduct of steel production -- instead of cement, the production of which requires fossil fuels and is much more damaging to the environment, said Barowitz.

Farming ice

One of the biggest innovations in the building will be an "ice farm" that produces ice at night, when electricity costs the least. The ice will then be used to cool the building during the day. The building will also use co-generators to reduce the cost of bringing electricity to the site, said Barowitz. And yes, lights are set on motion sensors to further reduce energy use.

Because of advances in technology, "builders are coming to realize that efficiency for the environment means efficiency for the developer, and green buildings are better able to provide real value to the tenants," said Lippe.

Carlton Brown, a developer who is a member of the Mayor's advisory board, said he has two buildings that fall under the green category, 1400 on Fifth and the Kalahari. When he first conceived of 1400 on Fifth in 2002, Brown said other developers and some people in local government urged him not to build green, but he went ahead with help from two state programs.

The first was the state Green Building Tax Credit program, provided by the Department of Environmental Conservation, which has allocated an additional \$25 million in credits for New York buildings that qualify since its inception in 2000.

The second program consists of grants from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority that help finance green building. The authority also provides computer modeling and material analysis, said Colleen Ryan, a spokesperson for the agency.

Brown also noted that it is not difficult to get a basic LEED certification -- or even silver level certification -- by making simple changes to the building plan. Although the City Council's latest round of changes to the 421-a city tax abatement program did not include green provisions as a quid pro quo, that change could be coming down the pike, said Brown.

"They give bonuses if you create more affordable housing; maybe bonuses should be tied to green housing too," he said.

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