



It's getting easier to be green

Written by David Hill

Apr 22, 2008 at 10:34 AM

Kermit the Frog sang that it's hard to be green. Being green might be tough for a green puppet, but being green today is very popular. Across the country, the Green movement toward energy conservation continues to gain momentum. It is now heading in the direction of the creation of affordable housing, and home builders and contractors are leading the way.

Thursday in Thief River Falls members of the Northwest Minnesota Housing Cooperative gathered at the Ralph Engelstad Arena to celebrate the organization's 10th anniversary, but members also heard from John Harrington of the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund. Harrington's presentation provided information about Green Affordable Housing.

Jeff Fagerstrom, manager of the Northwest Minnesota Housing Cooperative in Thief River Falls, which was responsible for the Knox Elementary School project in 1988, Meadowlark Court project, and 41 homes behind the Best Western, said his board of directors has decided that it wants to pursue a green building project. That's why they invited Harrington to speak about green projects.

Harrington said he had a couple of purposes for speaking at the annual meeting of the Northwest Minnesota Housing Cooperative: try to convince members to start talking and thinking about green projects and answer their questions; and obtain feedback from any contractors who may have ventured into green building construction.

Energy efficiency is certainly a part of what this movement is about, but Harrington said it's also about using materials that are more durable and have less of an impact on the environment, even at the point of making the product. It's also about healthy living. "Healthier housing makes for healthier communities," he said.

There may be value in it as well. Let's face it said Harrington, "Wal-Mart isn't going green because they've had a change of heart. They're doing it because it makes good economic sense."

Early demonstration project efforts are showing success. Harrington talked about Greater Minnesota Housing Fund, the Family Housing Fund, and Enterprise, which all collaborated to create Minnesota



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Green Communities. The project is designed to foster the creation of affordable, healthier, and more energy efficient housing throughout Minnesota. The initiative supports the production of affordable housing with markedly reduced energy costs, use of materials beneficial to the environment, conservation-minded land use planning, and attention to the creation of healthy environments and lifestyles for individuals, children, families, and communities.

Is it successful? Minnesota Green Communities is now the largest green building program in Minnesota, with 190 units completed, 423 under construction, and another 1,223 under development.

Harrington's other purpose at the meeting was to obtain feedback on green projects and some of the difficulties contractors are facing. Some of the feedback he has already received includes discussion about some of the costs. Initial costs may be higher than traditional materials, but as consumption increases, costs have been declining, said Harrington. He also noted that home builders have to look at the operating costs of a home too when they are in the process of building a home. The operating costs for green homes are substantially less than other homes.

Harrington said he had also fielded concerns about the availability of some materials. Changes over time, said Harrington, will start having an impact on availability.

Builders have also made requests for marketing assistance. Builders are particularly interested in the type of marketing assistance that informs potential homebuyers of the benefits of building green.

But Harrington noted that more and more guidelines and requirements are forcing contractors to build green. In fact, the success of going green is in large part due to the newly-adopted Minnesota Housing mandatory requirements that new construction projects meet the Minnesota Overlay to the Green Communities Criteria starting in the fall of 2007 Super RFP funding round.

Harrington also noted that efforts are underway to convert green building guidelines into national standards, so he anticipates substantial growth in participating in green building. In a less direct manner, more incentives are being offered to potential green building partners.

Harrington said 2007 seemed to be a tipping point. A McGraw-Hill study showed that as of 2007, about half of all home builders had been involved in green building.

As Harrington tells it, "the train is starting to leave the station."

There are a lot of reasons builders would support going green, but contractors note that city councils and other local governmental units could have a greater impact on green building projects in the future. Harrington said they could do more to assist green community by providing incentive packages, reviewing zoning ordinances for conflicts and establishing bike paths and sidewalks.

Harrington also said it may be a good idea for a community to participate in specific campaigns. Many communities, he said, are already taking this path and have joined a Cool Cities campaign.

Cool Cities cities have made a commitment to stopping global warming by signing the U.S. Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement. Begun in 2005, the Cool Cities campaign empowers city residents and local leaders to join and encourage their cities to implement smart energy solutions to save money and build a cleaner, safer future.

Becoming more aware and in tune with what's available and what needs to be done to support and encourage green projects is an important goal for contractors and the public. Harrington encouraged builders and interested parties to attend Greenbydesign, the third annual statewide conference presented by Minnesota Green Communities. The event will take place May 21 and 22 at The Depot in Minneapolis. The conference is aimed at providing housing, government, and trade professionals the

tools needed to build energy efficient, healthy, and sustainable housing.

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