

State adopts greenest building codes in U.S.

Marisa Lagos, San Francisco Chronicle, 1-13-10

SACRAMENTO -- Newly constructed hospitals, schools, shopping malls and homes in California will be some of the greenest in the world, after a state commission voted unanimously Tuesday to approve the most stringent, environmentally friendly building code standards of any state in the nation.

The new code, dubbed Calgreen, will take effect next January and requires builders to install plumbing that cuts indoor water use, divert 50 percent of construction waste from landfills to recycling, use low-pollutant paints, carpets and floorings and, in nonresidential buildings, install separate water meters for different uses. It mandates the inspection of energy systems by local officials to ensure that heaters, air conditioners and other mechanical equipment in nonresidential buildings are working efficiently. And it will allow local jurisdictions, such as San Francisco, to retain their stricter existing green building standards, or adopt more stringent versions of the state code if they choose.

"This is (something) no other state in the country has done - integrating green construction practices into the very fabric of the construction code," said Tom Sheehy, acting secretary of the state Consumer Services Agency and chair of the California Building Standards Commission, which approved the standards. "These are simple, cost-effective green practices. ... California should be proud."

The code was supported by a wide range of building industry and realty associations, as well as the state Chamber of Commerce. Industry officials said that it would increase construction costs only slightly.

The regulations were opposed by several private organizations that offer construction rating systems, including the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council, whose LEED certification system for sustainable green building and development practices is one of the best known in the world.

Elizabeth Echols of the U.S. Green Building Council's Northern California chapter said her group is most concerned with the provision of the code that would allow cities and counties to adopt more stringent standards, which she said could result in confusion for builders, local governments and the public. She rejected the notion, suggested by several speakers at the meeting, that her group was simply trying to protect its market share by discouraging a competing verification system.

State officials said the regulations create a single comprehensive code, clearing up confusion over varying regulations, and it allows builders to receive green certification without paying a third party.

In July 2008, the same commission approved similar, voluntary building standards, and it has worked with the construction industry since to develop the mandatory code. As buildings account for about one-quarter of the state's total greenhouse gas emissions, the new requirements will be an important step in helping California meet its goal to fight global warming by reducing the state's greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by 2020.

The commission took action after Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed legislation in 2007 that would have instituted a green building code for the state. The governor, who praised the standards approved Tuesday, said at the time that the commission, not the Legislature, should draw up the regulation.

Matthew Hargrove, a vice president with the California Business Properties Association, said the regulations will be especially useful for smaller jurisdictions that have been unable to develop their own green construction

guidelines

"There will still be jurisdictions that want to go with LEED - San Francisco will not ditch it," said Hargrove. "But outside the coastal areas it will be helpful - like in West Sacramento, where they looked into creating a green building code but balked because it's cumbersome to develop and they didn't have the resources."

His members, he said, have been clamoring for a state certification program.

"At the end of the day you will have a whole bunch of cities that never would have included this in their building doing it, and doing it in a way that won't kill the economy," he said.