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The challenge of green certification is worth it

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Are you thinking about building a home and want to go green?

With all of the information on the market regarding new green products and energy-efficient systems, it can be rather confusing for anyone embarking on building a residence or retrofitting an existing house to know what direction to take.

Perhaps you have heard of products attesting to being green that may seem questionable, or you have doubts about installing a newer type of heating and air-conditioning system. Luckily, several benchmarking systems have been developed over the last decade or so to guide developers and homeowners.

LEED for Homes by the U.S. Green Building Council; the National Association of Home Builders Green Building Standard; and Green Globes Green Building Initiative are well-established options. They provide flexibility to choose the level of sustainability you wish to achieve and have been well-researched and vetted by the professional building trades.

Cost estimates range from \$3,000 to \$7,000 to certify a home through the LEED program, and though arguments could be made that this investment has the potential to pay for itself in the long run, some homeowners may understandably choose to pass given the tight economy.

Regional and local green building certification programs exist in more than 80 cities and states where resident demand is strong enough to support ongoing local initiatives, and these programs are usually much less expensive and are sometimes coordinated with local authorities so that permits are expedited and strategies aligned with municipal priorities.

Currently, Kansas City does not have a regional certification process for residential building. But given the growing interest in green building our practice

is seeing, we may look to Green Built Home in Madison, Wis., EarthCraft in Atlanta, as well as Earth Advantage in Seattle as examples of how to institute this option. Homeowners usually can recover Earth Advantage's nominal fee through local government grants. It is important for homeowners in Kansas City to realize that if they want to see more green building and development, they need to support local initiatives.

Benefits

There are many advantages to certifying a home: better quality construction, higher resale values, potential benefits from insurance and mortgage companies and lower long-term operating costs. A number of federal, state and local government incentives can help offset the additional costs. Deciding to certify a home prior to development can help set priorities and provide a framework to be sure that all the potential benefits are considered and covered.

Certification rating systems include: Sustainable Sites, covering issues with land use and transportation; Water Efficiency, covering irrigation, regulated toilets, faucets and shower heads; Energy Efficiency, regarding code, conservation and green power; and "Materials & Resources," concerning recycling and construction waste management.

The point system can be a real motivator to push for a high-performance, high-efficiency building, and the third-party rating provides peace of mind that everything the team set out to achieve is actually completed. It's really easy to say the rating system will simply be a guide without actually certifying, but we see that the contractors and owner are more likely to concede on key green features down the line when there isn't a set goal everyone is working to achieve.

Challenges

There is a significant effort involved in dealing with these benchmarking systems. There are lengthy matrices of questions to carefully consider regarding which green strategies are important to the project and how they will be achieved. Not all strategies will be chosen, most likely, as the costs and complexities of each need to be weighed.

All of the work related to the certification needs to be carefully documented and submitted for review by the third-party rater. This can be time-consuming, so be prepared for that commitment or hire a professional to assist. Many architects and designers are LEED-accredited and provide such services.