

Code Guidance for Greener Homes: One Last Shot for the 2012-IGCC

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If you've followed the development of the International Green Construction Code, you'd know that the code's coverage of low-rise residential buildings has been knocked around like a punching bag. First it was in. But since it was incorporated by reference and the development committee couldn't touch it, the residential content meshed neither with the new code's intent nor with its technical elements. Then it was pulled out. Then, most recently, it was not voted back in... and with this current, last round of opportunity, there's one final chance to put it back in, and do it right.

For state and local governments that are looking for a code to provide oversight of minimum greener building measures and practices in their jurisdiction, it's been a shame not to have an answer for low-rise residential. Neither the IGCC nor the Standard 189.1 compliance alternative covers these residential occupancies. Certainly our current environmental, economic and human health challenges demand that we provide such an answer for jurisdictions that want to extend the benefits of healthier, safer and more efficient buildings to the structures where we live, sleep and play.

If you've ever toured the [Solar Decathlon](#) – especially this year with its emphasis on affordability – you might even better appreciate that we deserve more from our homes.

A [study](#) released earlier this month reveals that buildings built to a building energy code saved energy (and thus money) compared to homes not built to such codes. This may come as no surprise, but it's important validation that codes can do a good job of [delivering minimum performance](#). Codes may never be the silver bullet approach to achieving truly sustainable buildings, but we do need them to keep pushing us all along ([watch the webinar](#)).

This need for code-intended guidance to govern greener low-rise residential buildings is a product of a growing comfort with raising floor for minimum acceptable practice. Much like the [history](#) of greener commercial building codes, local governments have been pioneering home-grown programs and adopting rating tools like [LEED for Homes](#), and are now increasingly looking for a code that will give them ownership and oversight over better, greener residential buildings. Some point to the [National Green Building Standard](#) (NGBS), but it's a rating system, and not written for use as a mandatory, minimum code (even though it also carries a code-like nick-name, [ICC-700](#)). LEED for Homes demands a far more substantial minimum entry point beyond business-as-usual, but rating systems do not a useful, enforceable code make (see the [USGBC policy brief](#)).

Despite the way it may have appeared, the recent decisions at the [IGCC hearings in May](#) to disapprove proposals to reinsert residential into the scope of the code were not a vote against including low-rise residential in the IGCC. They were merely votes against a few proposals that were not perfect for inclusion as written. Clearly a new approach was needed.

After the hearings, I worked with the [Green Builder Coalition](#) and Chris Mathis (of [Mathis Consulting Company](#)) to convene a group of experts to devise a new plan. The comments we submitted were made public last week on the Council's [IGCC development web site](#) (our comments are on pages 43-49, but be careful, it's 1200+ pages).

I've extracted the comments [here](#). We proposed that a short chapter be added to the code that would pull a handful of commonly-agreed-upon practices across all category areas from the existing language of the IGCC. These 20 items – a refreshing number contrasted with the code's nearly 250 pages of code language for commercial buildings – can provide a reasonable and significant push for residential buildings.

It's two comments, really. One to make the chapter elective to the adopting jurisdiction (more palatable to some), and one to include it in the core text of the code (preferred).

What do you think? I hope you'll [join us in Phoenix](#) on November 2nd to fix this major shortcoming of the IGCC with a smart, compact, and remarkably significant solution.

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