Government Summit Highlights Accountable, Results-Based Government

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At USGBC's 9th annual Government Summit last week it was as clear to all in attendance that governments at every level are leading by example in building sustainability. Among the signs of progress was Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus announcing an increased commitment by the U.S. Navy and Marines to build to LEED Gold, up from their previous LEED Silver commitment. We also saw USGBC award the 2011 Federal Green Building Leadership Awards to both Kathleen Hogan and the ENERGY STAR program for their foundational work. Attendees received an update from the White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair Nancy Sutley on the President's Better Buildings Initiative. The fighting spirit of our government employees as they look to meet the challenge of building energy efficiency and sustainability was plain to see, in sharp contrast to the attitude displayed a mile away at the Capitol.

Perhaps most uplifting was the closing plenary, which featured world-changing energy efficiency scientist, advocate, and former California Energy Commissioner, Dr. Art Rosenfeld and the Governor of Maryland and former Mayor of Baltimore, Martin O'Malley. The timing and content of their presentations drove home a point that often gets lost in the everyday noise of politics – that government, when advised by science, can be effective in everything from reducing energy consumption to fighting violent crime, and can be open and accountable to the people they govern.

Dr. Rosenfeld told the story of testifying in California in the late 70's, where he made the then-revolutionary claim that energy efficiency could stop the ever growing need for more power plants and more fossil fuels. The truth of this claim is plainly evident today, as California's per capita energy consumption has been maintained from that point forward, while doubling in the rest of the country. This is a clear example of a state government honestly assessing the direction in which they were headed and acting on the science clearly presented to them to change course.

Dr. Rosenfeld then explained a new opportunity to change course at the global level by presenting his most recent research on the "global cooling capacity" of white roofs that, by reflecting light (and thus, energy or potential heat) back out of the atmosphere, are offsetting greenhouse gas emissions to the tune of 10 tons of CO_2 for every thousand square feet of white roof. Dr. Rosenfeld added that the CO_2 emissions from half the cars in the world could be offset for 20 years if all urban flat roofs worldwide were white.

Governor O'Malley followed Dr. Rosenfeld with present day examples of how Maryland is reacting to the reality his state's needs and using GIS technology to deploy resources to where they are most needed. The Governor showed the evolution of a map of locations of violent crimes in Baltimore and you could see how the city became safer every year. Maryland is now applying this approach across the state, from the cleaning the Chesapeake to encouraging green buildings. Real results will trump partisan bickering every time, and in the case of Maryland we can see these results in the green building world, as the state has more than 28 million square feet of certified commercial space. We expect this success to continue, as the day before the summit, the Governor signed a bill that made Maryland the first state to enable the adoption of the International Green Construction Code as a minimum building code.

The idea of accountable, results-based government is certainly a breath of fresh air in today's political climate. I'd venture to guess that the standing ovation that followed these presentations demonstrates that the Government Summit attendees felt the same way. Next year, when many of these same folks gather together at the 2012 Government Summit, there certainly will be more green building dots on the map and many more positive results to celebrate.

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