Congressional Outlook Uncertain, but Executive Branch Opportunity Abounds

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There has been a whole lot of negative talk about the prospects for energy, climate or other significant legislation coming out of our newly divided Congress, and that is not the best news for the green building industry. However, this does not imply that green building advocates should pack up and go home – in fact, it means quite the contrary. It turns out that a renewed focus on utilizing the legal authority already granted to federal agencies by Congress could reap huge benefits for architects, engineers, builders, developers, manufacturers and others involved in the green building process.

The shocking size and scope of the United State's potential energy and water savings were highlighted by a 2010 study on existing authorities held by the executive branch to push efficiency in commercial and multifamily buildings. USGBC commissioned this study with a diverse group of building sector organizations (e.g., the Natural Resources Defense Council, Real Estate Roundtable, and Building Owners and Managers Association).

The findings of this report were clear. There is something, and usually something very impactful, that nearly every agency can do to improve the public and private building stock. The more digging we did into the existing authorities, the more opportunities we discovered to "stoke the fire" of the building industry and its sustainable potential. I wrote about the highlights of the report when it was released, and the opportunities I noted then remain before us—still knocking—today.

In many ways, the sheer quantity of opportunities identified by the report (and sheer size of the report itself) is daunting. Where should the White House, the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, etc. start? Which potentially transformative policy must come first?

That's why the full report was just the beginning of a broader federal push. Over the weeks and months to come, we will be reaching out to our 16,000+ member companies and working with our other partners on the report to generate support for industry- and agency-specific recommendations—ones that are targeted, actionable, and potent. We want to make sure that the voices of our member companies and the larger green building community are heard by the executive branch. We expect to deliver real results from their advocacy and leadership. We have already sent our top three recommendations over to the Department of Energy. Our January 21st memo recommends action on a green real estate appraisal standard, the tax deduction for commercial energy efficient commercial buildings, and loan guarantees for financing retrofits.

And the executive branch is paying attention! The President recently announced the Better Buildings Initiative (BBI) to improve commercial building energy performance, and he touched specifically on two of the three priorities. The BBI calls on Congress to take action but also lays out the steps the Administration is going to take by utilizing their existing authorities to create better buildings, better jobs, and lower energy bills.

By targeting executive branch action— along with continuing to push Congress to make progress on BBI and our other priorities like energy and water efficiency, healthy built environments, livable and walkable communities— we will continue to push forward toward the transformation of the built environment. Elections may change our strategy, but they certainly don't change our priorities—or our expectations for meaningful results.

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Member employees, USGBC staff

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