How Stringent Should a First-Ever Model Green Construction Code Be?

You can probably guess that the question of "how far to go?" with this first-of-its-kind national model green construction code attracts a lot of varied answers. In fact, this may be the biggest and most unanswered question surrounding green building code development. The question of where the green building code should fall on the stringency continuum (originally posed in a previous post) should be considered against the outcomes of similar code and standard processes that have asked the same, seemingly simple question.

USGBC, ASHRAE and IES started this conversation in late 2006 and resulted in today's Standard 189.1, a strong compliance option within the International Green Construction Code (IGCC). And while everyone knows that that precedent doesn't necessarily make it right, it should be helpful that a compliance option of the IGCC already sets certain targets.

No matter the complexity of the debate (and debate it they did at the IGCC hearings last week in Dallas), it comes down to a choice between a green building code that takes either (what I'll call) a *big leap* or a *small step*. The current versions of the IGCC and the Standard 189.1 compliance option provide more than sufficient fuel for a local conversation about what is best for your community. Every community should take a look and see how these better building practice ideas (written in the form of building codes and standards intended for increasing fundamental protections from the hazards of our built world) can be woven into your master plan – even if only to take action next year or even later.

So, *big leap* or *small step*? On the one hand, it's a lot easier to winnow the code down to your comfort level than to figure out how to ratchet it up – but even ratcheting down can be a tricky exercise. People who have been in code development for decades longer than I have will tell you that given the amount of thought that's put into every last interrelated detail, it's better not to change a thing.. On the other hand, if the code is unreachable (or is perceived to be so), it may not be used at all, or at least not like a code – the way it is being very carefully written to be used. In this second scenario, it is argued that the code may not achieve its maximum potential of giving everyone a little push (rather than giving very few a big push).

As logic would have it, it's neither a big leap nor a small step, but it's very likely somewhere in between. There are a couple of ways to pinpoint the best stringency level, but the truth of the matter is that green building has always been the product of community dialogue.

So fear not what you hear about technical development schedules and degrees of "completeness." By their very nature, these tools will always be under development and maintenance, but the tools are here today and the time for action is now. Has your community commissioned a task force to review how it will broaden fundamental protections by greening its codes?

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