

Green Building, Design Slowly Take Hold in Memphis Area

By STACEY WIEDOWER

When residential and commercial construction hit new boom times – whenever that might be – the rebirth will take place in a new era with new rules.

“People are becoming more environmentally aware, and that’s going to change the market,” said Don Glays, executive director of the Memphis Area Home Builders Association. “There are a lot of advantages to buying green, and people are starting to understand that.”

The city and county governments also understand it, and it’s one reason the joint Office of Sustainability launched its Green Building Task Force in 2011. The group, which included professionals across the design, building and development industries, was charged with “looking at ways to remove barriers to sustainable development,” said [Paul Young](#), Office of Sustainability administrator.

“They were specifically looking at code barriers and also permitting procedures – things we’re doing that can expedite development and incentivize green building practices,” Young said.

The task force’s efforts have culminated in a report that recently reached the desks of both Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. and Shelby County Mayor [Mark Luttrell](#). The Office of Sustainability’s next step, Young said, is to meet with both mayors to discuss the findings and determine which of the report’s five key recommendations should be put in place first.

“Ultimately, we hope to see at least two of the five come to fruition before year’s end,” Young said.

The report’s findings include one measure that’s already under way in Shelby County: updating the county’s building code from the 2006 version of the International Building Code to the 2009 version, which includes higher standards for sustainable design. The county also is looking to update its energy standards to align with the 2009 Energy Code, the latest federal guideline.

“Certain codes are in the process of being changed,” said [Jimmie Tucker](#), managing principal of Self-Tucker Architects, which served as a consultant to the mayors’ task force. “There will be more extensive requirements from an energy code standpoint.”

It’s a measure that pleases Josh Somes, chairman of the Memphis chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council.

“We’ve been lagging behind with our current energy/building codes,” said Somes, principal and owner of SustainSTUDIO, a design-build firm that specializes in high-performance remodeling.

Somes said the market as a whole has begun to take more notice of energy- and eco-friendly design programs and products.

“Certainly on remodels there are more home energy audits going on,” he said. “We’ve also had a couple new LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) buildings recently – the i-bank in Germantown and the Methodist Le Bonheur Germantown expansion. Those are both good examples of green building.”

Through a grant provided by Memphis Light, Gas and Water Division, the USGBC local chapter has awarded funds to qualifying local projects, including i-bank Germantown, Big River Engineering and Manufacturing and the Court Annex 2 in Court Square, Some said.

Along with the area's slowly growing roster of LEED-certified structures, programs like MLGW's EcoBUILD have quietly changed the face of the local construction industry during a time when building itself has been quiet.

"People's interest in this has grown," said [Thomas Chamberlain](#), strategic marketing coordinator for EcoBUILD, a voluntary green building program that aims to improve energy efficiency by 30 percent in homes built to its standards.

Chamberlain, himself a member of the Green Building Task Force, said the group has called for EcoBUILD's expansion. Specifically, point three on the task force report recommends making EcoBUILD certification mandatory for new residential structures and creating an EcoBUILD commercial component.

"Right now, EcoBUILD is optional for single-family residential," Young said. "How about expanding that for commercial structures?"

Chamberlain said the two ideas are currently in the concept phase.

"It's something we can sit down and think about," he said. "We need to examine the resources we have to make it happen. We love the program and we know it works, but we want to make sure we think it through before expanding. The last thing we want to do is expand a program that's a great program and then not have the resources behind it to make it work."

The fourth recommendation of the Green Building Task Force report is the launch of an educational initiative that aims to combat myths about sustainable design.

"This would educate the public about the true costs of sustainable development, because the perception is that it is very expensive, when in actuality it's not necessarily that much higher, at least for (new construction)," Young said. "Findings show it's on average about 2 percent higher than traditional construction."

Finally, the task force has called for the creation of an electronic process that would streamline the permit procedure.

"If you're a developer and you're submitting an application to the Office of Planning & Development, they have to send it to engineering, then they get it back and then somebody in planning has to look at it, and so on, and all that time the developer doesn't know what's going on," Young said. "The recommendation says that if we want to incentivize people to do the right thing, we need to make it easier for them to do it."

Tucker said the Green Building Task Force studied best practices around the country to form its recommendations.

"We looked at other communities to set a benchmark for what we ought to be striving for, and to give people a level of comfort that we're moving in the right direction," he said. "Memphis has miles of new bike lanes, and people are saying, 'Wow, look at Memphis.' They're surprised we're taking these progressive measures. We're trying to stay in step with other progressive measures that are putting our city in the same sentence with Portland (Ore.), Chicago, Seattle,

Austin (Texas) – cities that are on the leading edge of sustainability.”

Young emphasized that the goal of the task force was not to put more strain on the development community, but rather to make it easier for builders to create high-quality, forward-thinking developments that put Memphis on par with the rest of the country.

“What we’re trying to do is ensure that we’re keeping up with the rest of the world,” he said. “If all development standards are increasing and we’re staying the same, we’re lowering our standards. Our goal for Memphis and Shelby County development is to ensure that we have quality new development in our region. These new standards will help us move in that direction.”