

Building green now requires more accountability LEED system expensive for multiple-owner properties

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In this era of Al Gore and all things "green," an environmentally responsible home has become of paramount importance. Our home is, for most of us, the place we spend the most time in, and the asset we spend the most money on. Yet, just as purchasers have to think about more than sustainable bamboo floors and rooftop solar panels when buying green, homebuilders have to consider how best to promote and reward green practices.

Historically, green projects could be promoted with little to back up the claims, leaving it to buyers to separate truth from fiction. Independent research was often necessary to confirm environmental standards, hence the establishment of the first accreditation system, called Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design -- or LEED -- by the U.S. Green Building Council in 1998. Today, this points-based rating system is the primary green certification for North American developers.

But LEED certification is expensive -- paperwork alone can cost upwards of \$50,000 -- and the system, which was designed for single-owner commercial or institutional buildings with complex heating and air-conditioning systems, does not translate well to lowrise residential buildings in the Lower Mainland. As well, LEED certification is only awarded after the building is occupied and tested over time -- difficult for a strata development where individual owners may or may not want to participate after the builder turns over the keys.

While some local builders have been dissuaded from even attempting to build green, others are trying new regionally tailored approaches. For example, the Residential Environmental Assessment Program -- REAP -- was created by the University of British Columbia to ensure higher green building standards for residential development at the university.

REAP takes into account environmental conditions and economics, as well as user behaviour patterns, to look at green building certification in a much more specific way. It awards points for installing various green features, while pre-occupancy confirmation by consultants ensures the appropriate standards have been met.

For homebuyers, this means the level of certification is known before a home is purchased, not a year after. Our company, Adera, helped UBC develop the

REAP program via two projects: Legacy, certified REAP silver; and Pathways, the first to earn gold certification.

Another alternative for builders is the Built Green accreditation program. In 2005, the non-profit Built Green Society of Canada introduced its certification system to B.C. for single-family homes. It is a points-based program, similar to REAP, but uses the Canada-wide EnerGuide program as the base for its energy reduction component. For homebuyers, Built Green certification ensures a building is designed and built to provide greater energy efficiency and improved indoor air quality, to reduce pollution, water usage and maintenance and to preserve natural resources.

Adera began working with Built Green to evolve the program to work with the higher density housing forms Adera generally builds.

Veranda, in Surrey, was a pilot project for the Built Green row townhouse program, and obtained gold certification. Another pilot project, called NoMa, for stacked townhouses in the city of North Vancouver, was also Built Green gold. The Brownstones townhouse project in South Surrey will also be Built Green gold.

Adera has now committed to build all its homes under the Built Green program, including our newest development, appropriately called Green -- B.C.'s first four-storey apartment condominium project to achieve Built Green gold status. Green will offer every purchaser a Can Car co-op car membership, as well as solar heating to supply at least 25 per cent of the hot water heating load, and motion detectors to control parkade and common area lighting. In total, almost half of the 1,290 units enrolled in B.C.'s Built Green program are by Adera.

We believe that while a local certification program may not be as widely known as LEED, it is a practical step forward as green building continues to move from niche trend to mainstream practice. We also believe that Built Green may become the national standard for lowrise residential construction.

Green homes with third-party certification by REAP and Built Green provide homebuyers with peace of mind that what they're getting is not mere "greenwash," but rather environmentally conscious, sustainable housing that's made for British Columbia -- and built for life.

Norm Couttie is the new president of Adera Development Corp., both a pioneer attached-residency developer and green builder. An Adera Built Green show suite is on display this weekend at the "Green Living Show" at BC Place.

Built Green is a non-profit organization, run by the B.C. and Alberta chapters of the Canadian Home Builders' Association.

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