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BUSINESS LAW: Santa Rosa weighs 'green' requirements

Builders favor voluntary rules to spur competition

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SANTA ROSA – Public officials are weighing several options for strengthening Santa Rosa's green building program, including the possibility of replacing it with what could be one of the most extensive set of mandatory requirements in the North Bay.

Four years ago, Santa Rosa was one of the region's first cities to adopt voluntary guidelines for environmentally friendly "green" building, but since then at least a half dozen local cities have adopted stricter, mandatory rules. Now, proponents of a mandatory ordinance in Santa Rosa are looking to match or exceed those rules with new requirements for both residential and commercial construction.

"We were in a leadership position and it would be wonderful to do that again," said City Councilwoman Veronica Jacoby, who supports a mandatory ordinance.

An ordinance in Santa Rosa would likely have a major impact on the region's construction industry, particularly homebuilding, because of the city's size and available land. During the first half of 2007, Santa Rosa accounted for about half of all new housing units permitted in the three-county North Bay, and about 19 percent of nonresidential permit dollars.

Homebuilders have consistently opposed green building requirements because they add steps to the permitting process and can add thousands of dollars in construction costs. They also argue that the industry is already adopting increasingly sophisticated green building practices on its own.

"If you make it mandatory, people will build to that level and stop," said Amy Christopherson, director of community relations for Santa Rosa-based Christopherson Homes. "If you make it voluntary, people will compete."

North Bay cities typically rely on the same basic guidelines for their green building policies. They use the Berkeley nonprofit Build It Green's GreenPoint Rated system for residential construction, and the U. S. Green Building Council's LEED, the Leadership in Environmental Energy and Design, program for commercial projects. Both assign specific point values to more than 100 different features ranging from solar panels to recycled steel framing. The differences lie in the exact levels that builders must meet under each rating system.

Rohnert Park among toughest

Proponents of a mandatory ordinance in Santa Rosa say they see a potential model in two new rules passed recently in Rohnert Park. The rules are among the region's strictest, requiring homebuilders to achieve up to twice the GreenPoint rating – or higher, for smaller projects – of similar ordinances in cities such as Windsor and Novato. Rohnert's Park's minimum commercial rating is 65 percent higher than Windsor's.

"Some builders will go full bore ahead and be the trend-setters and some builders will do the absolute minimum, and I want to raise that bar," said City Councilwoman Susan Gorin, of the need for a strong ordinance.

Ms. Christopherson pointed out that as point requirements increase it will become more difficult to find low-cost ways to achieve the higher ratings.

"You can get points for low-hanging fruit," she said. "Once you get past a certain point, everything left is very expensive."

Santa Rosa could go even further than Rohnert Park if it pegs its ordinance to the new, 2007 GreenPoint system, as opposed to the widely-used 2005 ratings. The new system does not award as many points for some of the more routine practices, and requires all homes to exceed the state's Title 24 energy-efficiency requirements by 15 percent.

Homebuilders warn that the energy requirement could discourage them from addressing other environmental issues that are given less emphasis by the GreenPoint system, such as water use.

"In general, home design would need to be more expensive to accommodate the energy requirements," said Charlie Carson, executive director of the northern division of the Home Builders Association of Northern California.

Ms. Gorin said strict energy-efficiency rules will ultimately decrease the costs of utilities for homeowners.

"It may cost more in the short run but our buyers will recoup those savings in a very short time frame," she said.

Homebuilders are preparing their own proposed ordinance.

Santa Rosa's City Council will hold its first public meeting on the issue on Sept. 25.