

GREEN BUILDING: Explaining the labels on healthy, green homes

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When looking for healthy, environmentally friendly food, shoppers may come across a bevy of labels, from “organic” to “free-range” to “all natural.” Similarly, when shopping for a healthy, environmentally friendly home, buyers will notice many certification labels: Energy Star. NC Healthy Built Home. LEED-H.

What do all these labels mean? And what are the differences between them all?

Let’s start with two existing designations, and then discuss two new ones about to hit the market.

Energy Star

The U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency developed the Energy Star program to encourage efficiency in household appliances and electronics, and later expanded the idea to certify homes. Simply put, this certification translates into lower utility bills and, therefore, less of the pollution associated with power generation. A third party evaluates the home to see if it qualifies for the Energy Star rating.

N.C. Healthy Built Home

This certification takes a more holistic approach to home building, including everything from site design to building materials to energy efficiency. Independent inspectors check the house throughout the construction process and award bronze, silver, gold or platinum distinctions. Because there wasn’t a national certification program at the time, the state of North Carolina and several groups (including the Western North Carolina Green Building Council) took it upon themselves to create one. Since debuting in 2005, there have been 82 N.C. Healthy Built Homes finished and another 447 are under way.

LEED-H

The U.S. Green Building Council already had a national standard for green commercial buildings, called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). After several years of pilot projects and reviews, the LEED-Homes guidelines are expected to be officially released late this month. Like the Healthy Built Home program, it creates strict criteria, requires independent certification and offers varying degrees of commitment.

National Green Building Standard

The National Association of Home Builders is also creating a designation for environmentally friendly homes and hopes to unveil its program in time for its February national conference. The purpose of the label will be to give homebuilders more flexibility and to make green homes more affordable.

With those advantages, however, buyers may also have to practice more due diligence. The more lenient

scoring process could allow builders to incorporate green features from one category, such as energy efficiency, while perhaps foregoing features in other categories, such as sensitive site design and preparation. The association is also still deciding how to verify the use of green features and construction methods.

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