

GREEN BUILDING: Helping define green residential building certification programs

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The words “green building” are pretty common in Asheville these days. Everyone who talks about the topic probably has his or her own definition of what it means. Hopefully, though, all of the definitions have something to do with sustainability and energy and natural resource efficiency. In an attempt to define a building as “green,” certification programs have erupted to prevent green washing and provide a marketing edge for the builders willing to make human health and environmental sustainability a priority. In Asheville, there are three main building certification programs that attempt to qualify and define what a green home is.

Energy Star is a household name for appliances, but what is an Energy Star home? Like the appliances, the standards are created by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and inspected by a third party. But Energy Star homes include more than just efficient appliances. Every Energy Star home is built to be at least 15 percent more energy efficient than the same home built to code. This standard is reached through a combination of well-installed and efficient insulation, heating and cooling equipment, water heaters and windows. Each home is computer-modeled to determine its energy usage and then inspected by a nationally-trained Home Energy Rater to make sure the home will perform as intended. Energy Star homes are more comfortable, durable and energy efficient. Both Progress Energy and Duke Energy offer utility rate discounts for certified Energy Star homes.

The N.C. HealthyBuilt Homes Program was created through collaboration between the N.C. State Energy Office, the N.C. Solar Center and building professionals throughout the state. This program is administered locally by the WNC Green Building Council. Every HealthyBuilt home is also an Energy Star home, but the program goes above and beyond energy efficiency. HealthyBuilt homes start with a menu of items which is divided into seven sections: site (erosion control to native plants); water (low flow fixtures to rain gardens); building envelope (insulation and framing); comfort systems (heat pumps to geothermal systems); appliances, lighting and renewables (solar hot water system), indoor air quality (moisture resistance to nontoxic paints) and materials (recycling to bamboo). Each home must attain a certain number of points in each section to qualify for the certification. These homes are then inspected to make sure each of the items is actually achieved. Certified HealthyBuilt homes span price range and style options from alternative to conventional, high-end to affordable. With only two years since its inception, there are about 40 certified homes complete and 400 HealthyBuilt homes under construction in Western North Carolina.

LEED, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a green building rating system created by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED offers rating systems for commercial buildings (categorized into new, existing and interiors) with neighborhood development, school and home rating systems in the pilot phase. LEED for Homes is scheduled to be publicly available in June. LEED for Homes will be very similar to N.C. HealthyBuilt Homes, but will have more strict prerequisites and will carry the national recognition associated with LEED.

For information about the certification programs visit: www.energystar.gov; www.healthybuiltasheville.org;

and www.usgbc.org.

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