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New home building code a timid step up

Council should have adopted stronger energy standards.

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Posted: Monday, Dec. 20, 2010

No doubt about it: The N.C. Building Code Council has adopted new energy efficiency standards for homes built in North Carolina, and that's a step in the right direction.

But it's a timid step - further complicated by the council's decision to seek \$3,000 worth of concessions to homebuilders who opposed the new energy code because it would boost the cost of new homes. Instead of adopting new energy standards that would bring about a 30 percent reduction in energy use, the council adopted standards that will produce a weaker 15 percent reduction.

This is a shortsighted idea, because the new energy code, supported by an emerging group of green homebuilders, would have meant the costs of the 30 percent energy reduction would be more than offset by energy savings homeowners would realize within about five years. In other words, the 30 percent standard would have saved homeowners money over the long run, made their houses cheaper to heat and cool, and boosted the value of their homes when they decide to sell.

And it's particularly disappointing because Gov. Bev Perdue - who has predicted her administration would make North Carolina a national leader in green energy - undermined adoption of the stronger energy code for new homes by endorsing the lower standard as well as the plan to give homebuilders their concessions.

Worse yet, Perdue said she had not seen a list of the suggested concessions. That's irresponsible. Some building officials worry that those concessions might cause safety problems. For instance, they would allow only battery-powered smoke alarms rather than hard-wired smoke alarms in rooms being renovated with a building permit.

Despite the governor's promise to make the state a green energy leader, her willingness to bow to some homebuilders' concerns about costs sends a very clear message: She did not mean what she said, and making N.C. homes much more energy efficient is not a priority.

This is baffling from another perspective. The higher energy standard would be achieved by some simple practices such as using more insulation, slightly better windows and better designed lighting. Consultants who studied this issue saw significant benefits for North Carolina's economy because more insulation, better windows and more efficient lighting fixtures can all be manufactured here -

producing more jobs for N.C. residents.

But Perdue said in a Monday letter to the Building Code Council that there was "great concern about the financial impact of adopting better energy efficiency standards that will raise the cost of constructing a new home at a time when the housing sector continues to struggle with the worst market in decades."

We don't mean to dismiss those concerns. But adopting the higher standard would have improved homes, made them worth more to owners when they go on the market, and be less expensive to operate - and thus less expensive to purchase over the long haul.

North Carolina flubbed an opportunity to provide strong leadership on energy standards. The new energy code will result in some cost and energy savings. Perhaps in time the Building Code Council will reconsider its timid decision and adopt stronger energy standards.



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