

OPINION

B.C. behind on green home building

Added costs:
Despite our fine talk, U.K. will be building only net-zero carbon homes by 2016, 35 years ahead of the B.C. target



Vancouver claims to have the greenest building code of any city in North America, but the Brits are winning a global race to build energy-efficient new homes.

And a report from the University of Victoria-based Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions is calling on B.C. to start walking its talk.

In the U.K., the government, working with the country's homebuilding industry, set a target in 2007 for England to have all new housing built to a net-zero carbon standard by 2016. And the country is on track to meet its goal.

By contrast, "B.C.'s current efforts will not result in net-zero buildings until 2050," says a news release issued by the Pembina Institute, which carried out research for the Pacific Institute.

The province has committed to leading the way to net-zero buildings, but needs stronger policies on energy conservation and renewable energy to achieve its objective, according to Pembina.

Meanwhile, Britain has been benefiting from a slow, steady approach that adjusts building regulations incrementally.

Neil Jefferson, building development director of the National



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Net-zero homes produce as much energy as they consume through design elements that reduce energy use and incorporate such features as solar panels to generate the power that is still needed.

House Building Council, spoke about the strides made by Britain at a Vancouver housing conference last fall.

Initially, it cost builders about 25 per cent more to construct housing that balanced energy consumption with energy generation. Now, building to 2016 standards instead of the 2014 standard costs only an extra five per cent.

Jefferson reported British consumers accepted the changes because they were gradual, and industry fully co-operated. Homeowners particularly appreciated lower energy bills. (Energy costs generally are higher in Europe than here.)

Less successful have been efforts to convince England's homeowners to invest in older houses to bring them to the 2016 standard. A net-zero carbon standard generally requires excellent insulation — sometimes resulting in overheated homes — and windows, plus energy-efficient appliances and perhaps solar or photovoltaic roof panels, generating as much energy as is consumed.

A 2011 report by the British National House Building Council notes Canada's consumption of primary energy and electricity per capita is 'among the highest in the world.'

David Cameron's government adopted the zero-carbon initiative to keep to Britain's Kyoto commitments and avoid having the population face possible future "fuel poverty." The European Union has a similar policy goal for housing, with a 2019 target.

Vancouver, aspiring to be the world's greenest city by 2020, intends to require buildings and houses constructed after that date to achieve energy neutrality by reducing energy use by 50 per cent over 2007 levels, and using renewable forms of energy to make up the other half of the targeted reduction.

What makes the policy challenging for Vancouver, says Neil Moody, CEO of the B.C. Homebuilders' Association, is

affordability. Net-zero carbon homes do not come with net-zero cost. Anything that adds cost, in this city, is problematic.

The Independent Contractors and Businesses Association's president, Phil Hochstein, agrees, noting his members are concerned about higher costs resulting from changes last year to the building code directed to making residential construction greener.

Proponents of carbon-neutral construction argue that any incremental cost of building for improved energy efficiency eventually is recovered by homeowners or renters through offsetting savings on energy costs.

But, in Vancouver, anything adding to upfront costs

associated with house buying is controversial.

Pembina notes that B.C.'s buildings account for nearly 30 per cent of energy use and 12 per cent of the province's greenhouse gases.

With total floor area in residential and commercial buildings set to increase by 2050 by 58 per cent, over 2007, the imperative for action is clear.

A 2011 report by the British National House Building Council notes Canada's consumption of primary energy and electricity per capita is "among the highest in the world," with housing accounting for 17 per cent of consumption.

That's not hard to believe. Many in this country appear oblivious to the climate change crunch.

In my last two Vancouver residences, I watched as two new houses were built on adjacent lots, one with a three-car garage, the other outfitted with a unit for central air conditioning.

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