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LEED-constructed schools raise taxes and offer little else

Friday, March 19, 2010

By Keith Coleman

Since the pilgrims first landed on Plymouth Rock in the winter of 1620, generations have relied on North American lumber for homes, stores, schools, houses of worship and any other buildings that have helped shape this country.

But in recent years, in the grip of environmental correctness, some groups have deemed some lumber to be "certified" through the U.S. Green Building Council and any other lumber to potentially be of lesser quality or questionable source. Of course, this "special" lumber -- just like bottled water -- is marketed differently and costs more.

As far as any member of the New Jersey Building Materials Dealers Association can tell, the only difference that this certified lumber offers is layers of red tape for the supplier and the ultimate increased cost to the consumer.

The issue of certified lumber is now before the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, which is considering S239, requiring new public schools in New Jersey to use more expensive lumber deemed certified by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. A companion bill (A1076) is before the Assembly Education Committee, awaiting a hearing date.

As a building materials dealer, I am deeply concerned about what would happen if this legislation became New Jersey law. Construction costs for schools would unnecessarily increase, with absolutely no benefit to the students and teachers who use these buildings or the taxpayers footing the bill.

Such legislation would also set a dangerous precedent that could lead to all new public buildings in New Jersey having to use lumber certified by the U.S. Green Building Council. Such legislation would quickly waste millions of dollars in taxpayer money.

With New Jersey teetering on bankruptcy and local school districts facing major cuts in state aid, this legislation is impractical, unnecessary and does nothing to solve the paramount problems plaguing the state.

Such legislation also would make it more difficult for people in the building materials industry to do public work. LEED requirements cause costs to increase throughout the supply chain, from the forests to the retail outlets.

Under LEED, the lumber can be handled only through the strict chain of custody by those who are certified in the program. If this lumber is put in the hands of a yard that is unaffiliated, it is actually deemed corrupted and cannot be sold as certified.

If my company were to become LEED certified -- so that we would be permitted to sell this certified lumber -- it would cost us thousands of dollars to follow the program's regulations. We'd also have to stock certified and uncertified lumber in all the dimensions, doubling our inventory, and make sure the products were clearly separated.

This would double my costs for such expenses as financing, space allocation, administration, insurance and other related expenses.

And, after all this, we would still be offering the same quality lumber as we do now -- such as Douglas fir harvested from heavily controlled and well-managed forests in the Northwest.

What supporters of LEED don't want the public to know is that building materials dealers already purchase lumber from commercial forests strictly

regulated by the government. Companies can't just cut down trees and not replace them; it doesn't make economic sense.

That's why there is more standing lumber in this country now than there was 100 years ago -- despite everything we have built with wood.

As such, there is absolutely nothing wrong with lumber not certified by LEED. But scare tactics are making it seem inferior, prompting well-intentioned state lawmakers to consider legislation to protect the public.

I strongly question the value of LEED, other than as a way to generate revenue for the people who oversee the program. Before any laws are adopted in New Jersey that will increase taxpayer expenses, lawmakers must recognize that lumber, itself, is already the most renewable building material out there -- "certified" or not.

Keith Coleman, president and owner of Hamilton Building Supply in Hamilton, is second vice president of the New Jersey Building Materials Dealers Association.