

The Right Time for the Hamptons Green Alliance

By Frank Dalene



“The green-building movement is coming like a freight train and the train is out of control,” declared a speaker at the Green Drinks gathering in Southampton in March. A freight train out of control is a shocking thought, but one I have known about for some time now and it is the motivating force behind the formation of the Hamptons Green Alliance. At this moment, members of the building community are gathering at roundtable meetings, discussing the liability problems that might arise, caused by certain towns adopting a mandatory Energy Star Program. Meanwhile, other members of the building community are gathering together to form the Hamptons Green Alliance to share their collective experiences on a solid foundation of building sciences to educate the public, develop best practices in green building and improve means and methods of green elements to prevent the green freight train from crashing and wrecking everything in its path.

Members of the east end building community met last year to develop a policy to oppose the mandatory requirement of the Energy Star Program that was adopted as law in Brookhaven and other towns in Suffolk County. We discussed the potential conflict of interest to have a third-party inspector that is paid by the builder to certify a requirement needed to obtain the Certificate of Occupancy. We discussed the potential liability issues for builders and trade contractors using new products that rushed to market to fill the needs for builders to obtain the Energy Star certification. New products suddenly appeared on the market without prior history and known performance expectations. Installation of the new products did not conform to manufacturer’s specifications.

Some manufacturers used deceptive marketing practices to represent their product for improper uses or applications contrary to building scientist’s objections. Concerns arose about building airtight homes requiring mechanical air exchange provided by bathroom fans but having no assurance the homeowner would properly maintain their home, possibly causing indoor air quality problems. Those in the building industry know that when problems such as these occur in homes, the builder is blamed and gets sued. To add insult to injury, the builder’s liability insurance contains language excluding coverage for any air quality problems, possibly leaving the builder totally exposed to the threat.

During the same time I was invited to serve on the East Hampton Town Energy Star Committee representing the building industry. We addressed all the same potential problems and liability issues including potential liability issues for the town by mandating what once was a voluntary program. We advised the town to slow down and take one step at a time before mandating the Energy Star Program. The committee developed and approved a prescriptive code that incorporated the Energy Star specifications but without requiring a third-party inspector and full certification. The East Hampton Town Energy Savings Program was enthusiastically supported by all stakeholders in the town and passed the Town Board unanimously in December 2007. For the residents in East Hampton Town, the freight train slowed down a bit.

The surface was only scratched by addressing the many potential problems arising from the green-building movement; we needed to do more. The green-building

movement’s greatest motivational force is the cost of energy and energy costs are rising at an alarming rate. Homeowners seeking renewable energy solutions are seeking other green-building elements at the same time. Not all products labeled green are actually green. Not all information is accurate or true. New phrases such as “sustainable homes,” “energy-free homes,” “carbon-neutral footprint” and “cradle-to-cradle design” need to be defined in a pragmatic way so the homeowner can understand what each means and make an informed decision to include certain green elements in their home to achieve a level of green they desire. Only through education will it be possible for the homeowner to understand that choosing certain green elements has an upfront cost but the payback period is reasonable, the ROI is justifiable and at the same time the choice to go green has an impact on a better future for their children and grandchildren. The Hamptons Green Alliance has taken on this challenging task. The response has been overwhelming as building industry leaders come forward to participate. The opportunities and benefits to our own businesses should be rewarded as we establish ourselves as leaders and align ourselves to a cause that will have a positive impact on generations to come. With the help of participants, contributors, manufacturers, sponsors and other green organizations we plan to do our part to bring the freight train under control.

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