



Progress and criticism for Green Communities

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Massachusetts awarded its first "Green Community" designation in mid-2010.

Last month, the number of municipalities in the state to receive that designation hit 14.

Two years into the program, state officials said the designated towns are, indeed, becoming "green." There have been some criticisms of the program, though.

The designation requires municipalities meet certain criteria – they must adopt an energy building code that requires new construction be more energy-efficient, reduce energy consumption 10 percent in five years, purchase only fuel-efficient vehicles and adopt zoning and permitting "green" facilities.

In turn, the cities and towns become eligible for green energy funding initiatives.

Meg Lusardi, the director of the state's Green Communities Division, said the program is an early success, with 103 municipalities holding the designation and an additional 121 holding stretch energy codes.

"We got 35 in the first year, and we were blown away," she said. "We thought we'd get 10."

Lusardi said early reports showed the Green Communities on track to meet their goals.

"For the first year, there were no concerns – everybody was working on their energy plan," she said. "Anecdotally, I've heard of one or two towns who think they've reached 20 percent already."

According to Lusardi, the energy reduction requirement has not been a burden on cities. In fact, she said, it has proven to be one of the program's draws.

"One of the questions asked (in a survey of the communities) was why a community became a Green Community," she said. "The response towns selected first was that they wanted to save money on the funding."

Natick Town Administrator Martha White said the town is proud to be designated as a Green Community.

"We feel Natick has been a leader in reducing emissions, and we're pleased to be part of the program," she said.

White said the town was "absolutely" on track to reach its energy-reduction goals.

She did add, however, that the town and state had disagreed on some issues.

"We've done a lot of solar power, and we've entered into several power-purchase agreements," she said. "We don't feel the state has been properly crediting us for that."

White said she understood the state's viewpoint that the town wasn't actually reducing energy usage, but she said so acknowledgement of using "greener" energy was warranted.

"I feel they need to take a look at that, policy-wise," she said.

Anne Mazar, the chairwoman for Mendon's Community Preservation Committee, has been involved in that town's efforts.

"I think it's a great program," she said. "I think the state has been fantastic in supporting the town."

"I highly recommend it for other towns," she added.

Not all view the program so favorably. Mark Kablack, the chairman of the public policy committee for the Home Builders Association of Massachusetts, said his organization had several concerns.

"When the Green Communities Act was brought into being, it allowed municipalities to adopt the stretch energy code. One of the most important concern we had as a trade association was the concept of the code – that it could result in an erosion of the uniformity of the state building code."

Kablack said the standard state building code – established in 1974 – had eliminated much confusion over building codes.

"Prior to that, there was no code – every city and town had its own code," he said.

According to Kablack, the association's fears about stretch codes were confirmed when the state fire marshal proposed a stretch code last year. Though the proposal was not implemented, Kablack said, it represented a possible fracturing of building standards.

Kablack said the association was further concerned about the additional costs the stretch code imposes on builders.

"We have testified about how the costs associated with making a home more energy efficient adds to the cost of building a home," he said. "In this market, the costs cannot necessarily be passed to the consumer – builders are marketing a home in a market against a competing home that might not be."

Although the association lacks empirical data on the additional money necessary, Kablack said, it has heard about it from its members.

"Anecdotally, I've heard figures from the \$8,000 to \$9,000 range all the way up to \$15,000 to \$16,000 for a 1,700-sq-ft home," he said.

He said the fact that new construction must follow the stretch codes presents a problem for homebuyers as well.

"Because the stretch energy code is mandatory, it removes consumer choice," he said. "There are some concerns that have been priced out of housing in Massachusetts."

Lussardi said the division had not received any complaints about how the stretch codes had been implemented.

"I have not heard reports of issues or problems with it," she said.

Green Communities officials said studies had shown that energy-efficient homes sold better as consumers look at the features of a home.

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