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ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Sustainable building industry beginning to find footing

By **JAMES PALEN**, The Daily Transcript
Friday, September 9, 2011

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Subsidies supporting sustainable retrofits won't likely last forever. In fact, some of them have already expired. And with the growth in awareness of the green industry, it's no big deal, according to a group of sustainable building executives at a late August roundtable discussion at the *Daily Transcript* offices.

To some roundtable guests, the end of certain subsidies is actually a welcomed event.

"I wish the rebates were gone," said Roy Heine, president and chief executive officer of **Suntrek Industries**, of the California Solar Initiative. The hassle of the rebate process is something he won't miss, and he wasn't alone.

A few years ago, that might not have been the case. But prices are dropping when it comes to sustainable building, and the industry is beginning to walk on legs of its own, the group said.

The pricing of solar energy systems have come down so far, Heine added, that the model would actually work without any rebates at all.

The industry is beginning to mature, as shown by its pervasiveness not only in building but desirability post-build, the group said. It seems people want to be green now, even if it costs a little extra upfront.

Not long ago, that was a tough sale. But **Hughes Marino** Principal Dean Petersen said prospective tenants looking into properties are increasingly willing to turn down less expensive, non-sustainable options -- to a point, anyway.

"We always look at three or four alternatives," Petersen said of working with clients. "If the choice is between two buildings, and the dollars become close ... the green building is always the favorite."

When using the term "close," Petersen wasn't talking just \$5 or \$10. He was talking 5 or 10 percent.

The sustainable buildings are also the ones to get the first look, and they've become big marketing points for landlords looking to talk up the energy savings to prospective tenants, he added.

At more than 10 percent of a difference, the client tends to look back to more traditional buildings for the upfront cost savings. Still, that's a serious shift from the past, he said.

"It's creeping along," Petersen said. "In the last five years, people are finally becoming aware, and they're talking about it.

Before that, every now and then a tenant would say, 'Hey, let's talk about what's the greenest way to do what we're doing?'"

While the task of building awareness has been met with much success in the past few years, new objectives are emerging in the maturing industry of sustainable building.

A couple of those objectives: providing measurable data on a building's green performance and convincing future occupants that it's worth using those measures to their financial advantage even if it requires some changes in behavior.

Sean Hulen, vice president of **Barnhart Balfour Beatty**, believes that the next building industry trend will revolve around including expected building performance in the submission of proposals.

"We're developing that department within our company right now," Hulen said, "so that we can go into a proposal selling the cost of ownership costs with the cost of the building at the same time."

The U.S. Navy, for which Barnhart Balfour Beatty does a significant amount of work, is already notifying companies that it will require that type of information in proposals beginning as soon as 2013.

Trying to calculate building operation costs through the next 50 years is "going to be a challenge," he added, but it is on horizon.

More than the obvious calculation, the biggest part of that challenge is going to be the building's occupants, said James Jenkins, sustainability manager of **BNBuilders**. It's those occupants that will determine the true performance of the building.

Many businesses are finding cost-effective alternatives, he said, but it's going to be the people inside them that will make the model work over the long haul.

"It's going to come down to cultural changes," Jenkins said. Some companies are adopting policies toward a goal of sustainability ahead of the curve, he said, such as sending workers home when office temperatures become unbearable or allowing certain clothing when it's warm.

"It's not even started yet, other than a few companies here and there," Jenkins said, and those companies are seeing significant savings in energy use, he added.

On the task of measuring sustainability, Joseph Vilella, president and chief executive officer of **SPADA Innovations**, said the future will hinge on the ability to make those types of savings feel real to building owners and occupants.

SPADA replaces copper-based telecommunications runs with fiber optic technology, something that can actually yield a measure of efficiency.

But without hard data proving the financial and social impact of the cultural change Jenkins spoke to -- such as the acceptance of operable windows in lieu of air conditioning -- it may be difficult to convince occupants of the benefit.

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"When you can quantify, you bring credibility", he said. "We are lucky that when it comes to our technology, it's very measurable ... (But) how do you measure something that doesn't have math attached to it?"

But according to Doug Kot, executive director of the San Diego chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, systems are being designed to quantify integrated building performance on all fronts.

Beth Brummitt, founder of the high-performance building modeler **Brummitt Energy Associates Inc.** said such ongoing commissioning of building performance is becoming more important to building owners, which will feed its own success. Years ago, no one cared, she said. But now it has become a part of the building's value.

"It will get the attention that it needs, and we'll learn that art," she said.

Roundtable participants

- * **Beth Brummitt, President, Brummitt Energy Associates**
- * Whitney Dorn, Sustainability Manager for Southern California, DPR Construction
- * Roy Heine, President & CEO, Suntek Industries
- * Sean Hulen, Vice President, Barnhart Balfour Beatty
- * James Jenkins, Sustainability Manager, BNBuilders
- * Doug Kot, Executive Director, San Diego Green Building Council
- * Dean Petersen, Principal, SVP, Hughes Marino
- * Matthew Porreca, Associate Principal, BNIM
- * Scott Riffenburgh, General Manager, Emerald Impact
- * George Rogers, CEO, RQ Construction
- * Keith Thompson, Partner, ELEN Consulting (sponsor, [article](#))
- * Joseph Vilella, President & CEO, SPADA (sponsor, [article](#))

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