

business issues

GREEN MUDSLINGING

BY JOHN CROSS, P.E.

THE POLITICAL SEASON is upon us. We are being bombarded by ten-second media bytes, campaign commercials and PAC advertisements either pointing the finger at George W. Bush and the Republicans for the recession or blaming Barack Obama and the Democrats for a feeble recovery.

Yet behind all of the hype of the 2012 presidential election, a far more intense and bitter political struggle is being waged. The two sides do not fall neatly into categories of Republicans and Democrats, but are rather the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) representing all things sustainable, and the American Chemistry Council (ACC) driving the American High-Performance Buildings Coalition (AHBC), which purports to represent building product manufacturers. At issue is whether the future of sustainable construction rating systems and standards will be driven by the green community or by building product manufacturers.

The trigger for this battle was the publication, by USGBC, of the third review draft of the proposed LEED 2012 rating system in May, which included two proposed credits addressing the disclosure of chemical ingredients in building products and encouraged the avoidance of certain chemicals in those products. The inclusion of these credits was USGBC's first foray into the arena of chemical content of the materials used in the construction process and brought an immediate knee-jerk reaction from ACC. ACC requested a meeting with USGBC to discuss these credits and the analytical data upon which certain chemical compounds were included on the list of those to be disclosed and avoided. The meeting brought no resolution to the issues.

From that point on, the battle has become nasty and, as with all battles inside the D.C. beltway, each side has its own story on how the events have transpired. ACC championed the creation of AHBC, which now includes in its 31 members the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufac-

While the two major political parties debate the best way to strengthen America, two groups in the construction world are battling over the best way to green the built environment.

turers, the American Architectural Manufacturers Association and a multitude of chemical, plastic and vinyl groups, as well as the Southern Forest Products Association. The stated mission of the AHBC is to promote performance-based energy efficiency and sustainable building standards developed through consensus-based processes derived from data and performance-driven criteria. The diminishment of USGBC's LEED rating system, which is not developed in accordance with an ANSI-based consensus process, is clearly the target of AHBC. To attack the LEED system and bring pressure on USGBC, AHBC leaders have implemented a strategy of using members of Congress to exert pressure on the General Services Administration, USGBC's largest client, to drop the use of the LEED rating system based on its non-consensus development process.

USGBC has responded by labeling the statements from AHBC as "false and misleading claims from narrow interest groups seeking to undermine [USGBC's] credibility." Using words like "obfuscation" and "innuendo," USGBC's CEO Rick Fedrizzi, in a *Huffington Post* commentary entitled "The Scoundrel's Handbook," wrote of USGBC's critics:

"They cloud what's clear because the light of day would expose them for what they are: scoundrels of the worst sort. In their effort to protect a status quo that is food for them but not so much for the rest of us, they wrap their world view in flag and country and patriotism, and loudly proclaim that to question their self-interest is somehow un-American. Regrettably, that's the way so much gets done these days in Washington and why it's not about who's right, but who's loudest, who lies and denies most convincingly and who is the most willing to pay, say or do whatever is necessary to win, regardless of the consequences."

The sad reality is that both sides of this battle have lost sight of their own goals. Wrapped up in the political battle to force GSA to drop LEED, the AHBC has lost its focus on the transparent development of green codes, standards and rating systems—and in defending its turf, USGBC has lost its focus on the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability.

Where does AISC stand? AISC has been invited on several occasions to join the AHBC and testify in GSA hearings against the LEED system. At the same time AISC has received numerous emails from USGBC, requesting that we send letters to GSA and our congressional representatives defending the value of USGBC and the LEED program. AISC has done neither. Why? Because the structural steel industry is neither a "scoundrel" nor an "obfuscator."



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▲ LEED certification has been given to hundreds of buildings, such as the University of California, San Francisco's Ray and Dagmar Dolby Regeneration Medicine Building (a 2012 IDEAS² Award winner). The rating system has long been the face and main driver of the green buildings movement, but the American High-Performance Buildings Coalition is hoping to change that.

Just as the Democrats point to the Bush administration as being responsible for the recession (and it was), and the Republicans hold the Obama administration responsible for the lack of a robust recovery (and it is), the arguments of both USGBC and AHBC have merit. Product manufacturers, including those of steel products, need to be transparent in communicating the environmental impacts of their products. Green organizations like USGBC need to be transparent in the development of their codes, standards and rating systems, listening to all scientific evidence—even when it is contradictory—and basing decisions in a consensus process.

The fact is that it is unrealistic to assume that an organization such as USGBC has the breadth of knowledge and technical expertise to develop an all-encompassing rating system that fairly treats every industry and product. On many occasions, the staff and technical advisory groups at USGBC have demonstrated that they simply do not understand the differences in the supply chain for different steel products that impact the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the product

and the structure in which it will ultimately reside. They can't be expected to. The individuals that have the knowledge to improve the sustainable performance of a product are within an industry, not outside of it. The role of an organization such as USGBC should be to motivate and incentivize that evolutionary process, not attempt to over-define or regulate it.

Maybe the structural steel industry is a bit naïve, but we still believe that an industry can be motivated by more than just maintaining the status quo. Since 1980 we have seen the environmental footprint of structural steel reduced by an aggregate 60% while our market share has increased by 10 points. How did this occur? It wasn't by just focusing on increased profitability, it wasn't by just focusing on reduced environmental impacts and it wasn't by just focusing on improved working conditions. It was because without even realizing it, the structural steel industry transformed itself from a rust-belt industry to a model industry for the 21st century by addressing environmental, economic and workplace issues in a comprehensive (and yes, I'll use the term), sustainable manner.

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Ironically, the single greatest factor contributing to the sustainable performance of a building is not the materials and products that go into the building but rather the level of collaboration between the disciplines involved in the design and construction of the building. As unlikely as it seems possible to occur within the context of Washington, D.C., calmer minds need to prevail, and collaboration between USGBC and industry groups must develop. USGBC needs to recognize that their credit system has become more than a casual encouragement of industry performance for a small percentage of materials in a building; it has become the threshold of measurement for all building materials.

Because of this level of impact, USGBC must invite a broader range of industry participation in the development of new LEED criteria through an ANSI-based consensus process. The design and construction community has

benefited greatly thanks to AISC's practice of developing its structural steel standards through the consensus ANSI process. We are convinced that these standards are stronger, not weaker, as a result of a broad range of open input, evaluation of analytic evidence and discussion. We encourage USGBC to embrace the consensus ANSI process, recognizing that the result will not be an industry hijacking of the LEED system but rather a strengthening of the LEED system through inclusion of industry knowledge.

On the other side, industry groups, including those represented by AHBC, need to recognize that LEED is not going to go away, and they need to take it upon themselves to step up, commit to the transparent sharing of analytical data and participate on the basis of product improvement rooted in a balance of environmental, economic and workplace impacts.

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