

The Press Enterprise

San Bernardino County vows to protect environment

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San Bernardino County wants to go green.

County officials unveiled a series of initiatives Monday aimed at encouraging homeowners and developers to build more energy-efficient homes and make the county more environmentally friendly.

"It is everybody doing a little bit that makes a big difference," Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane said in announcing the proposals.

Paul Biane, chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, announces a series of initiatives aimed at encouraging developers to build more energy-efficient homes. Under a plan that goes before the Board of Supervisors today, the county would waive permit fees for such items as solar panels and adopt more stringent energy standards on all new government buildings.

The county, Supervisor Gary Ovitt said, is "taking a lead in greenhouse-gas emissions issues and in becoming a green county."

"We will continue to push the model role we are becoming," he said.

The proposals come just a week after officials announced settlement of a lawsuit by Attorney General Jerry Brown that threatened to hold up the county's general plan, the blueprint planners use to guide future growth and development.

The settlement requires the county to create a plan by 2010 to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Biane, who first proposed the new initiatives, said Monday's announcement was unrelated to the attorney general's lawsuit.

The county had been working on the proposals for the past six months and had wanted to announce them earlier but held off as settlement talks with Brown gained traction, Biane said.

The county for years has been taking small steps to put in place more environmentally friendly measures and the new proposals, which apply only to unincorporated areas, are a major step forward, he said.

"I think it is a focused effort that hasn't been here before," Biane said.

The Proposals

The county under the new proposals would:

Waive building permit fees for existing homeowners who want to install solar panels, tankless water heaters, wind generators and energy-efficient heating and cooling systems. The fees range from \$78 for the water heaters to \$248 for wind generators. The county expects to issue about 136 permits for such devices this year worth about \$23,000.

Require all new county government buildings and major renovations to comply with the standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. The standards focus on water savings, energy efficiency, building materials and indoor environmental quality.

Establish a Web site, www.greencountysb.com, to provide information on the county's environmental programs.

Create a voluntary green builder program to provide incentives to developers. Under the proposal, the county would adopt the Building Industry Association's Green Builder model, in which homes must exceed state energy-efficiency standards by 15 percent, use at least 20,000 gallons less water each year and contain wood products primarily from sustainable forests.

In return, developers who participate would get their plans fast tracked for review, guaranteed timelines and would jump to the head of the line on field inspections.

Julie Rynerson Rock, director of the county's Land Use Services Department, said time equals money for homebuilders and fast-track planning reviews could save weeks for a project.

San Bernardino County becomes the second Inland government to adopt the building association's green builder standards. The city of Riverside created a similar program in June.

Plans Praised

The proposals announced Monday won praise from the building association and from at least one environmental group.

The Los Angeles-based Endangered Habitats League supports the county's efforts, Executive Director Dan Silver wrote in a letter to the county.

The program puts the county in the "forefront of energy efficiency and green building practices," Silver wrote. "It will save money and help combat global warming."

Todd Leibl, president of Victory Homes, a High Desert homebuilder, said the voluntary effort is a way for developers to do their part in reducing global warming.

"This is our way of giving back," he said.

Leibl said the more energy-efficient homes cost between \$5,000 to \$10,000 more, but as more are built, the costs will go down.

Now, county officials and building industry officials hope the cities, where the majority of homes are built, follow the county's lead.

"We hope this will dribble down to the cities in which we are building," said Frank Williams, CEO of the Baldy View Chapter of the Building Industry Association. "We hope cities will adopt the exact program the county is adopting."

Supervisors praised the settlement with the attorney general last week and are touting the new proposals and cite past achievements, such as the dozens of new hybrid vehicles bought for government use.

But a lawsuit against the county's general plan by the Center for Biological Diversity and two other environmental groups are still pending. The groups sued under the California Environmental Quality Act, alleging that the county's general plan does not analyze the effects of increased greenhouse-gas emissions from future development.