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Seattle Tests Flexible Energy Rules for Older Structures

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The city of Seattle is testing a new, more flexible approach to code requirements for older buildings that could become a national model for making these properties more energy efficient.

Under a pilot project, Vulcan Real Estate will renovate the landmark Supply Laundry building in the city's South Lake Union district and adopt a performance-based approach to energy savings.

City planners, Vulcan and the nonprofit Preservation Green Lab will set a target for reducing the building's energy consumption by more than 50 percent from that of comparable properties nationwide.

Once renovation is complete and at least three-fourths of the building is occupied, city officials will monitor the building's energy use. Should Vulcan fall short of its goal, an energy audit would determine how to bring the property into compliance.

"It's a way to work with building owners to give them the maximum flexibility to do what they want to do while holding them fully accountable," said Jayson Antonoff, an energy and climate change adviser for Seattle's Department of Planning and Development. "The real goal is to reduce energy consumption," Antonoff said, regardless of what method is used.

More flexible code requirements likely will reduce the cost of bringing older buildings into compliance — a change that could encourage owners to renovate the properties instead of tearing them down.

Seattle was picked for the pilot program because of the region's strong interest in environmentally friendly development. Seattle is one of seven cities nationwide that will soon require building owners to use an automated system that reports energy use to the city, so there will be a way to monitor performance.

A more flexible code for older buildings will give property owners "more toolboxes" they can use, said Liz Dunn, director of the Preservation Green Lab, a Seattle-based think tank affiliated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C.

The new approach also gives older buildings credit for features that may not be covered under current codes. For example, modern double-pane windows are more energy efficient than the single-pane windows typically used in older buildings. But the older windows often are operable — a source for outside air — and can be fitted with shades to reduce heat loss. There's also considerable energy savings in renovating an existing building rather than tearing it down and replacing it with a new building.

In addition, building owners can negotiate "green" leases that require tenants to use energy-efficient fixtures in their space, or that ask tenants to open the windows and cool the building when needed.

"Most of the energy wasted is in the operation of the building and how its tenants behave," Dunn said.

Vulcan volunteered for the project because it was interested in having a performance-based energy code for older buildings, said development manager Brandon Morgan.

To increase energy savings in the old laundry facility at 1265 Republican St., Vulcan is installing interior storm windows to conserve heat in the winter — a measure that wouldn't get credit under the current code because the storm windows are not permanent, Morgan said. Also, tenants will be encouraged to use janitorial services during the daytime rather than at night, to reduce the use of lights and heat.

It's hard to say how many Seattle buildings might be affected by the potential code changes. There are about 9,000 buildings smaller than 10,000 square feet, but how many of them are candidates for renovation is not known, Antonoff said.

Photo Caption: Vulcan Real Estate is renovating the Supply Laundry building in Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood under a pilot project involving the city's energy code.

Link: http://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/print-edition/2011/11/04/seattle-tests-flexible-energy-rules.html