

Crist Meets with Builders Association to Promote Green Building

By TOLUSE OLORUNNIPA (tolorunnipa@MiamiHerald.com)

South Florida's construction industry is still struggling amid a slowdown, but that shouldn't hamper environmentally-conscious building practices, a builders' trade group said during a Wednesday meeting in Miami headlined by Gov. Charlie Crist.

"The timing couldn't be better to adjust to green building [standards]," said Fernando Martinez, president of the Builders Association of South Florida. "While we were extremely busy a few years ago because of the way the market was, now things are slower -- it gives us an opportunity to adjust."

Crist, who spoke broadly about the relationship between Florida's environment and its tourism-dependent economy, said green building should be a key component of protecting the state's environment and its image.

"Eighty-five million people come into Florida each year not because it's ugly," he said.

The governor, who is running for U.S. Senate in a three-way race with Republican Marco Rubio and Democrat Kendrick Meek, also touted his environmental record, highlighting the advancement of Florida's solar energy sector during his tenure.

During a session featuring sustainable builders, Jay Huebner, vice president of Boca Raton-based HSQ Group Engineering, described a few of the multifamily-residential complexes his company has developed using environmental standards. For each project, he outlined the long-term cost savings of going green.

Tallman Pines, a 200-unit affordable housing project in Deerfield Beach, was developed using low-flow water fixtures, a drip irrigation system, solar panels and recycled demolition materials. Those green practices, which helped the project achieve LEED Silver Certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, cost about 5 percent more than traditional building practices. The projected cost savings, including \$10 per month in water savings for each unit, are nearly 30 percent over the long term, Huebner said.

Other residential projects incorporate new environmentally-friendly features that have higher upfront costs, but will ultimately save money over time, Huebner said.

But green builders face a number of challenges, the group acknowledged. They include standards and technologies that are constantly changing, the lack of public knowledge about green practices, and a sluggish economy that frowns on higher costs.

Harvey Ruvlin, the Miami-Dade County Clerk of Courts, told the group of about 50 that in a fragile real estate market, builders still need to be up to speed on energy-efficient practices in order to be competitive.

"The construction industry will reappear as the real engine of this South Florida economy," he said. "When it does, it's important that we build green; that we don't just go back to the way we did things."