IREM-SF Told New Energy Codes Will Be Tough to Implement

Strict new California Title 24 energy-saving codes will surely help protect the planet and will save building operators money in the long run, but they will also be the devil to implement. In fact, even regulators are scratching their heads and realizing they are going to have to cut property managers and tenants some slack before the new law can be effected.

James Zhan, a San Francisco building inspection supervisor, told members of the Institute for Real Estate Management that “government is not doing a very good job streamlining the code and implementing it. We are committed to streamlining the process, but we can’t do it alone.”

He said the code is about 150 pages long and compliance regulations exceed 1,000 pages. He appealed to all parties to cooperate with local and state government officials charged with implementing the new law to effect a reasonable implementation—and said, “We’ll probably have to grant some amnesty on some projects to get things moving.”

Regulators don’t want to further stall new construction or retrofits by aggressively enforcing the law. “We have to enforce, but if we hold up construction, that’s not a good thing,” Zhan explained. “We are not there to stop the process. We urge everyone to come to us—architects, contractors.”

Transwestern Senior Vice President David Ford, who moderated the program, said, “It’s refreshing to hear someone from the city be so honest.”

Tenants Complain Buildings Are Too Hot or Too Cold

Temperature controls are “out of control” and don’t always work, Peter Rumsey, P.E., of Point Energy Innovations told a BOMA Oakland/East Bay audience. He said that “42 percent of office workers are unsatisfied with their thermal environments.” This is the No. 1 complaint of office tenants. Tenants also complain about harsh fluorescent lights.

But new energy developments are on the horizon, with mandatory energy performance benchmarking for commercial buildings in San Francisco and California Title 24 statewide changes. “Tenants are starting to focus on energy,” Rumsey stated.

Breakthrough products like Nest, a programmable thermostat, are soon to be implemented in commercial buildings. There is also a move toward photovoltaic installations on roofs, which generate electricity from sunlight. Some buildings will even become zero net energy (ZNE).

Building professionals are also focusing on using sustainable materials as a way to improve indoor air quality and achieve healthier environments.

Rumsey used the term “biophilia,” which is the concept that bringing nature inside buildings makes people feel good. Features like living walls and plants make tenants more comfortable and improve productivity. Natural materials like distressed wood create a feeling of warmth and a connection to nature.

“Other innovations coming into use include electrochromic glass from manufacturers like View. Tenants can adjust the amount of light that comes in, reducing energy usage and costs. On the lighting front, Rumsey says that LED is the fastest change happening, along with occupancy sensor controls that save energy.

Radiant cooling used in new construction can save 40% in cooling a building. Chilled beams and radiant panels can be used in retrofits. And something as simple and low-tech as using smooth pipes that are short and fat with fewer bends can reduce HVAC costs by 50%.

“We’ll see winners emerge in software that make buildings easy to manage,” Rumsey said. Products will also deliver better comfort by allowing tenants to change temperatures in a zone and get personal control. A more comfortable point is also more energy-efficient. There are now even desk chairs that have heating and cooling controls.