

17 December 2008

Dear Editor,

Years ago, during a winter in Niagara Falls, NY, I ended up playing cards in an apartment somewhere around Eighth Street. It was Ray's apartment and he was on Public Assistance, which we called Welfare in those days. Outside it was in the low twenties, but it was hot in the kitchen. The card players, sitting around the table in jeans and t-shirts, complained about the heat every little while. "What's the thermostat set at?" someone asked. Ray shrugged. "It's in the other room." We kept playing cards and complaining about the heat. The radiator kept clinking. Finally, Ray got up and opened a window. Everybody was happy.

And we've been happy in Niagara County ever since. But let's review: The United States Green Building Council created Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) in the early nineties. LEED has established building designs, "green" buildings, that significantly reduce energy operating costs. The most recent studies report that an investment less than 1% of total construction expenses can provide up to 40% savings in energy bills and other benefits as well.

Early this month the Niagara County Legislature passed legislation requiring the proposed County Public Works and Social Services offices and future county buildings to be built to LEED standards. This will save taxpayers thousands of dollars over the years and, more importantly, is a giant step toward significant energy conservation in Niagara County. The legislation was written by David Brooks of the Niagara County Environmental Management Council and via the Council introduced by legislator Jason Murgia. These two especially, and the entire legislative body, deserve a thank you for doing the right thing.

This giant step forward, however, shouldn't stop there. There are at least eleven additional building projects totaling over 400 million dollars planned for Niagara County: the "all glass" Niagara Tourism and Convention Visitors' Center; the new training center at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station; the Niagara Falls police and courthouse; the Niagara Falls 152 unit public housing project; the approximate 100 suite NCCC dorms (plus another "glass-roofed" courtyard construction at NCCC); the NCCC Culinary Arts Institute; the Niagara Falls Experience Center; the athletic facilities at Niagara Falls High School; the new airport terminal; the International Train Station expansion.

If these are constructed to high LEED standards, savings to taxpayers would be in the millions. Selecting just two of these, with units and suites totaling about 250, and estimating a modest \$200 annual energy savings for each, would see 2.3 million saved over the buildings' lifetimes. Is this chump change for Niagara County residents?

All new construction in Niagara County that receives taxpayer money from city, county, state or federal sources, including IDA tax breaks, should be required to be built to LEED certification standards. But some of the above projects have already begun. Too late? Think again. Get to work immediately with design changes to make them LEED

compliant. Or perhaps those responsible for the non-LEED plans would be willing to make up the loss to taxpayers out of their own pockets. What were they thinking? That it's okay to be technologically over a decade behind? That energy costs will go down in the future? That global climate change isn't a reality? That the American flag isn't being soaked with blood and oil in Iraq?

Speculation and flag references aside, Niagara County now has the great opportunity to be a leader in energy conserving, even producing, green buildings. In a few years, people would first think about the Falls and gorge and then about the greening of Niagara, rather than Love Canal.

Meanwhile, State Attorney General Cuomo has issued a legal opinion that the New York Power Authority (NYPA) must stop handing out money "not related to their core mission." Stopping NYPA welfare checks for causes unrelated to their mission is a good idea. What the citizens of Niagara County need now is for Assemblywoman DelMonte, Senator Maziarz, Senator Thompson, the county legislators, and other community leaders of influence to work actively to establish a countywide green building requirement based on LEED certification. Since the core mission of NYPA is energy production, and hence conservation, they should be more than willing to provide the necessary expertise and funding to jump-start the rapid redesign process where it's needed. Niagara County citizens need their political representatives to urge NYPA to do this. The alternative is for our representatives to remain silent on the issue, to conduct business as usual, and to hunker down playing their cards while keeping the windows open.

Sincerely,

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