

800,000 Homes in God's Backyard? Building Code Battles, and the Future of Sustainable Cities Rises In Greece

Hey everyone, I'm Ronan. Thanks for spending a few minutes with me catching up on the week's biggest stories shaping the future of housing, resilience, and sustainable building. This week, we're looking at a surprising new source of affordable housing, a major fight over building codes, and a development in Greece that may offer a glimpse of what future communities could look like. Let's jump in.

Can Churches Help Solve America's Housing Crisis? America's churches collectively own enough land to potentially support 800,000 new homes. That's the idea behind a fast-growing movement called "Yes In God's Backyard," or YIGBY, which is making it easier for churches and other faith-based organizations to build housing on land they own. Realtor.com estimates faith-based organizations own more than 2.6 million acres nationwide. Because many churches are already located in established neighborhoods with roads, utilities, and large underused parking lots, supporters say they're uniquely positioned to help ease the housing shortage. California, Florida, and Virginia have already passed YIGBY laws, and Congress is considering legislation that would provide grants and technical assistance for similar projects. One example is already taking shape in Mint Hill, North Carolina, where Shiloh Truelight Church recently won approval to add transitional housing, vocational classrooms, and a dozen single-family homes to its campus. Supporters say the project will help families rebuild their lives through housing, job training, and support services. Critics questioned whether the added density fit the character of the community and raised concerns about traffic and neighborhood impacts. Local officials ultimately approved the rezoning. Real estate professionals say projects like these could influence neighborhood character, nearby property values, traffic, and future development. There are legal questions, too. While churches may own the land, federal Fair Housing laws generally prohibit housing discrimination based on religion, meaning these homes must typically be available to qualified applicants regardless of faith. And despite the excitement, available land is only part of the equation. Most churches are expected to partner with experienced affordable housing developers because financing, tax credits, and permitting remain major hurdles. Even California's pioneering YIGBY law has produced relatively few completed projects so far. Whether YIGBY ultimately delivers hundreds of thousands of homes or only a fraction of that, one thing is clear: faith-based organizations are becoming an unexpected new player in America's housing conversation.

<https://www.inman.com/2026/07/17/yigby-faith-based-housing-real-estate-agents/>?

Congress has finally passed its long-awaited 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act. The legislation creates new financing opportunities for affordable housing and manufactured housing, along with regulatory relief for community banks and higher FHA multifamily loan limits. But critics say it largely sidesteps the biggest reasons housing remains so expensive: restrictive zoning, rising land costs, labor shortages, insurance, expensive building materials, and mortgage rates that continue to squeeze buyers. As Green Builder magazine Editor-in-Chief Matt Power points out, the bill tinkers around the edges while leaving the structural problems largely untouched. For now, America's housing affordability crisis remains exactly that—a crisis.

<https://www.greenbuildermedia.com/blog/housing-act-arrives-with-a-thud>

The debate over housing affordability is also playing out in Maryland, where officials are considering changes to the state's commercial energy code, which includes large multifamily buildings. Builder groups say the revisions would lower construction costs and make it easier to build much-needed housing. Environmental groups—and at least one state lawmaker—say the proposal would weaken the 2024 I-E-C-C by eliminating a modest rooftop solar requirement and allowing some efficiency measures to be counted twice. Critics argue that may reduce upfront construction costs but leave apartment residents paying higher utility bills for decades while placing additional strain on the electric grid. The proposal is open for public comment through July 27.

<https://marylandmatters.org/2026/07/17/maryland-building-code-concerns-energy-efficiency/>

Maryland isn't alone. June legislative sessions showed just how divided states remain on building performance. New Hampshire declined to adopt the more efficient 2024 energy code. Delaware took no significant action on green building policy. Rhode Island rejected several proposals that would have expanded energy benchmarking, LEED requirements for public buildings, and indoor air quality standards while leaving its existing climate law intact. The question is: Should affordability mean lower construction costs today, or lower operating costs for decades to come? Increasingly, that answer depends on what state you live in.

<https://www.usgbc.org/articles/june-legislative-session-roundup>

It's summer, so let's do what everyone else seems to be doing and head to Europe. One of the world's most ambitious sustainable developments just reached another milestone in Athens, Greece. The Ellinikon has unveiled The Courtyards, a new neighborhood with 324 homes—and 85 percent of the homes released so far have already been sold or reserved. But the real story is the project itself. Instead of expanding onto farmland, Greece is transforming a former international airport into a 1,530-acre smart city centered around a nearly 500-acre coastal park. More than 70 percent of the site will remain green or open space, while climate-resilient infrastructure, LEED-certified buildings, and walkable neighborhoods are designed around the idea that residents should be able to reach most daily destinations within a 15-minute walk. Projects like Florida's Babcock Ranch and Denver's former Stapleton redevelopment share some of these ideas, but The Ellinikon combines resilient infrastructure, smart-city technology, and human-scale design on an extraordinary scale. With construction well underway and new neighborhoods already opening, it's becoming one of the world's most closely watched models for sustainable urban development.

<https://theellinikon.com.gr/en>

Speaking of innovative communities, Florida's Babcock Ranch is raising the bar once again. This fall, the nation's first solar-powered town will launch the Southwest Florida Resilience Accelerator, an eight-week program that will help startups develop and test technologies designed to make communities more resilient in the face of climate change. The focus goes well beyond solar panels. Entrepreneurs will work on everything from flood and wildfire modeling to AI-powered building inspections, tougher construction materials, water management, off-site construction, energy storage, and tools that help communities better understand long-term climate and insurance risks. And instead of testing those ideas in a lab, participating companies will have the opportunity to pilot them in a real, rapidly growing community.

<https://ambitionaccelerated.com/southwest>

Could clean air become the next luxury amenity? That's the question raised in a new Salon commentary arguing that while we don't receive a monthly air bill, many Americans are already paying for healthier indoor air through better filtration, advanced

HVAC systems, air purifiers, and air-quality monitors. The challenge is affordability. Some households can invest in tightly sealed, high-performance homes with balanced ventilation and whole-home filtration. Others rely on a portable air purifier, a box fan with a furnace filter, or nothing at all. For builders, the bigger question is whether healthy indoor air should remain a premium upgrade—or become a basic expectation in every new home. And if that sounds like a future problem, here's a reminder that it's already here. Wildfire smoke continues to affect millions of Americans, even hundreds of miles from the flames. Three simple steps can dramatically improve indoor air quality during smoke events: install the highest MERV-rated HVAC filter your system can handle—ideally MERV 13 or higher—set your HVAC fan to recirculate and run continuously, and create a clean room using a HEPA air purifier or even a simple DIY box-fan filter.

<https://www.salon.com/2026/07/19/breathable-air-is-a-luxury-paying-out-of-pocket-could-be-next>

When people think about heavy timber construction, they usually think beauty, strength, and sustainability. But here's another reason builders are paying attention: comfort. Heavy timber naturally absorbs and releases heat, helping moderate indoor temperatures. It also regulates humidity, contributes to healthier indoor air, and resists the cracking and warping that can come with temperature and moisture swings. Combined with a tight building envelope and structural insulated panels, heavy timber can also improve energy performance—another reminder that some of the best building innovations have actually been around for centuries.

<https://matfillc.com/?>

Some exciting news from the Green Builder Media team. Our Vice President of COGNITION Smart Data and market analytics, Jennifer Castenson, has a new feature in Forbes highlighting VISION House Asheville as a model for the future of American housing. The article explores how resilient construction, healthier materials, high-performance building systems, solar-plus-storage, and smart home technology can deliver homes that are healthier, more durable, and less expensive to operate over the long term. Click the link to the article in the show notes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennifercastenson/2026/07/14/healthy-products-boost-the-future-and-economics-of-housing/>

It's time for our Editor's Product Pick of the Week. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, using a ceiling fan with your air conditioner allows you to raise your thermostat by about two degrees without sacrificing comfort. ENERGY STAR says that simple adjustment can reduce cooling costs by more than 14 percent. Hunter's new 52-inch AirStack Outdoor ENERGY STAR ceiling fan is designed to move more air while using less energy, making it a smart choice for porches, patios, and outdoor living spaces. And while we're on the subject, here are three quick cooling tips. Set your ceiling fan to spin counterclockwise during the summer, turn it off when no one's in the room because fans cool people—not spaces—and choose an ENERGY STAR-certified fan that's properly sized for the room.

<https://www.hunterfan.com/products/ceiling-fans-airstack-outdoor-energy-star-with-remote-52-inch-2500022?>

Looking to build a career in high-performance home building? The National Association of Home Builders is now accepting applications for its 2027 Sustainability and Green Building Scholarship. The program is open to emerging green builders between the ages of 25 and 35 and includes full registration to the International Builders' Show in Las Vegas, a \$1,300 travel stipend, and complimentary access to the NGBS Green PRO designation course. Applications are due October 23, so if you know someone just getting started in sustainable construction, this could be a great opportunity.

<https://www.nahb.org/advocacy/industry-issues/sustainability-and-green-building/sgb-scholarship-for-ibs>

That's it for this week's Sustainable Building News. If you enjoyed today's episode, please like, subscribe, and share it with someone who cares about the future of housing. Thanks for watching, and until next week... keep building better.

