

Promised Land? Renewed Interest in the Resilient Belt

Hi, I'm Ronan, and this is This Week's Sustainable Building News. We've got a lot happening across housing, construction, energy, and sustainability this week, including a few stories that might make you rethink where the industry is headed. Let's get into it.

Maybe we should stop talking only about the Sun Belt and start watching what we might call the Resilience Belt. Realtor.com's new affordability rankings show Midwest metros dominating many of the affordability measures. Akron ranks first for median-income affordability, with Pittsburgh, Dayton and Toledo also in the top five. Columbus earns an A-minus overall, and Indianapolis gets an A. Now layer climate risk on top of that. A separate Realtor.com analysis found that nearly 90% of homes in Cleveland fall into its lowest climate-risk category. Columbus and Cincinnati are both at nearly 88%, followed closely by Dayton and Indianapolis. Another analysis using First Street data found the Midwest had the lowest climate risk of the U.S. regions studied. And Cincinnati is already preparing for this. The city says its relative affordability, abundant water and comparatively low natural-disaster risk could make it a destination for climate migrants. No place is climate-proof. These cities still face heat, flooding, severe storms and other hazards. But there may be a real opportunity here for builders. Take relatively affordable land and housing markets, add comparatively lower exposure to some major climate hazards, and then build high-performance, efficient, resilient homes designed for the risks that remain. That's a pretty compelling trifecta: affordable, more resilient locations, and better homes. Maybe some of America's most valuable future housing markets aren't the places we've been building the most. Maybe they're the places where we haven't been building enough.

<https://www.realtor.com/research/metro-report-cards-2026/>

Lincoln, Nebraska, just joined a pretty exclusive club. The city has earned LEED Platinum certification, becoming the first city in Nebraska and, according to Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird, one of only 10 cities nationwide to reach the Platinum level. This isn't certification for a single building. LEED for Cities looks across the entire community, measuring areas including energy and water, transportation, climate action, public health, economic opportunity, resilience, and quality of life. Lincoln was recognized for efforts including grid decarbonization, energy efficiency, LED streetlights, waste diversion, natural systems, affordable housing, and its broader resilience planning. This is a reminder that some of the most interesting sustainability work is happening far beyond the usual coastal suspects.

<https://www.1011now.com/2026/09/17/lincoln-mayor-announces-citys-leed-platinum-certification/>

Wish I could keep on a good news roll, but I have to share a sobering sign of just how much the AI boom is reshaping the U.S. economy. For the first time, inflation-adjusted spending on

information-processing equipment, including data centers and computer hardware, has surpassed residential investment. In the second quarter, spending on that equipment reached \$752 billion, while residential investment stood at \$748 billion. And the trajectories are moving in opposite directions: Since early 2021, residential investment has fallen 18%, while information-processing spending has jumped 51%. The gap could get much bigger. S&P Global estimates capital spending from just six major technology companies could exceed \$1.3 trillion in 2027. Meanwhile, housing construction continues to struggle with high borrowing costs and rising building expenses. Think about that: At a time when the country is wrestling with housing affordability and supply, more investment is now flowing into information-processing equipment than into residential construction.

<https://fortune.com/2026/09/20/us-economy-milestone-spending-data-centers-ai-boom-housing-residential-investment/>

Here's a surprising twist in America's homeowners insurance crisis: The greatest insurance stress isn't necessarily where climate risk is highest. New research highlighted by Brookings found that within metropolitan areas, homeowners closer to downtown faced average insurance premiums 39% higher than those living more than five miles from the city center. Nonrenewal rates were also about 20% higher. That's despite many major climate hazards generally increasing farther from urban centers. So what's going on? Researchers point to factors including older housing stock, aging plumbing and electrical systems, higher repair costs, crime, and the expense of bringing older homes up to current codes. And there may be a real-estate consequence. Greater insurance stress was associated with lower home values, although the researchers caution that the study doesn't prove insurance costs caused those declines. It's another reminder that resilience isn't just about where we build. It's also about the condition and performance of what we've already built.

https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-local-homeowners-insurance-market-stress-impacts-urban-and-suburban-housing-markets/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

For our weekly Editors' Product Pick, we're looking at an intriguing idea from Germany: a home battery for people who don't have solar panels—or even own a home. Rabot Energy's Rabot Flow is a 2.12 kWh plug-in battery designed for apartment dwellers. It charges from the grid when electricity is cheap and supplies stored power when prices rise. No solar. No electrician. And, according to Rabot, no smart meter is needed to get started. The battery costs about \$460, with estimated savings of roughly \$140 a year. Germany's economics and regulations don't translate directly to the U.S., but the concept is worth watching. Most U.S. home batteries are paired with rooftop solar or sold as expensive backup systems. Rabot offers a different proposition: storage as an everyday energy appliance. As time-of-use rates expand, could small plug-in batteries let Americans buy power when it's cheap and use it when it's expensive? More importantly, could they finally open residential energy storage to renters and multifamily residents?

<https://www.pv-magazine.com/2026/09/11/why-german-energy-provider-rabot-energy-is-selling-a-2-kwh-ac-only-battery-no-solar-required/>

If you want to see just how much wildfire-resistant construction can matter, check out this demonstration from Colorado. Firefighters ignited vegetation around two mock homes. The conventionally built home, with a wood fence, single-pane window and vegetation close to the structure, was quickly engulfed. The other, designed with wildfire in mind, used multi-pane glass, a metal fence and a five-foot buffer around the house. It was essentially untouched. The Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety says the lesson is that wildfire protection isn't one feature. The roof, vents, siding, windows and the first five feet around the home all work together. The difference is pretty dramatic, so check out the demo we linked to in the show notes.

<https://www.kunc.org/news/2026-09-20/fire-demo-shows-what-happens-when-a-home-is-built-for-wildfire-and-what-its-like-when-its-not>

This week's COGNITION Smart Data Hot Take shows a dramatic shift toward all-electric homes. In 2025, just 36% of home buyers said they would purchase one. Today, that number is 73%—more than doubling in a single year. It's a strong signal for builders and manufacturers that electrification is moving rapidly into the mainstream.

<https://www.greenbuildermedia.com/blog/interest-in-all-electric-homes-shocks-by-doubling-in-one-year>

On the latest Impact Series pod, Mike Collignon talks with urban planner Valerie Miller about the rapid growth of AI data centers and what communities should be asking before saying yes. They dig into water and energy demand, infrastructure, tax incentives, local jobs, and a question that's getting far less attention: What happens to these massive facilities when the technology becomes obsolete? The takeaway: Communities need to think beyond the initial economic pitch and plan for the full life cycle of a data center.

<https://studio.youtube.com/video/D51gNnVn4-A/edit>

Construction exoskeletons might do more than save workers' backs. They could help keep them safer. Texas A&M researchers put passive lower-back exoskeletons to the test with construction workers doing their normal jobs. Workers wearing them reported 37% less fatigue—and improved their ability to recognize jobsite hazards by 29%. That second number is what caught our attention. Researchers say reducing physical fatigue may leave workers with more mental capacity to notice hazards in construction's constantly changing environment. Exoskeletons are already more common in manufacturing and warehouses, but construction is harder because workers constantly switch tasks and movements. With the industry facing persistent labor challenges, technology that reduces physical strain while potentially improving safety could become an increasingly interesting tool on the jobsite.

<https://stories.tamu.edu/news/2026/09/17/construction-exoskeletons-may-help-workers-spot-hazards-by-reducing-fatigue/>

I'll leave you with an unusual two-fer out of Washington state: soccer and hempcrete. Suneeta Eisenberg has founded two nonprofits that don't seem to have much in common. One runs an inclusive women's indoor soccer team, while the other is working to build 33 hemp homes across Washington over the next five to 10 years. The homes use hempcrete, made from the woody core of the hemp plant mixed with lime and water. It's primarily used as insulation rather than structural support, with benefits that include breathability, fire resistance, mold prevention, and thermal performance. The connection between the two ventures? Eisenberg says both are about creating more equitable communities—one through access to sports and the other through healthier, more sustainable housing. It's a great story from the Cascadia Daily News. Check out the full article to learn more about Eisenberg's work—and, if her mission speaks to you, how you can support it. Click the link in the show notes.

<https://www.cascadiadaily.com/2026/jul/29/bellingham-woman-uses-soccer-and-sustainable-housing-to-build-stronger-community/>

That's it for this week's Sustainable Building News. We'll keep watching what's changing across housing, building, energy, and sustainability and bring you the stories that matter. I'm Ronan. Thanks for watching, and I'll see you next week.