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Rebuilding the walls of community

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Sustainability Desk

By Christopher J. Hall
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We can do better than this. Drive through most of our neighborhoods and I dare you to disagree. After seeing far too many jobs disappear and hundreds of thousands of our fellow Michiganders pack up and head south, it's time for us to stop wringing our hands and start rebuilding. But as leaders in sustainability, we need to consider something far greater than individual buildings — we are beyond the point of considering one green building at a time. The Triple Bottom Line isn't going to work unless we look at the bigger picture: our communities.

In the Old Testament, we can read that Nehemiah felt the same way. When he walked the perimeter of ancient Jerusalem, he inspected walls around the once-great city that were reduced to rubble. Gates were burned to the ground. A mighty fortress lay strewn about the land outside the city as tiny pieces of stone. After surviving the great hardship of enduring exile, the people returned to their homeland and were ashamed from seeing their city in disgrace. Nehemiah said, "We can do better than this." Under his visionary leadership, the walls were rebuilt. It took precise measurements by engineers, gallons of sweat and effort by laborers and substantial natural resources to attain that vision, but the results stand today. The people persevered and the walls sustained.

Right here and now with so many decimated neighborhoods in need of rebirth, our community can learn a lot from Nehemiah. Thankfully, we are starting from a very good place. Other cities, towns and villages look to West Michigan

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By the U.S. Green Building Council
Members - West Michigan Chapter
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something special here, but what is the recipe? Why do we have a faith in a better tomorrow in this community versus others in Michigan? Why do we work together in partnerships that are often messy and difficult to manage? Who knows. Where our uniqueness came from isn't as important as how it happens.

At Habitat for Humanity of Kent County, we are committed to rebuilding the walls of community in West Michigan. This has meant changing our model from solely building new, LEED-certified homes to renovating existing, abandoned homes. Recently, it has meant launching A Brush with Kindness and offering a fresh coat of paint, basic exterior repairs and landscaping to owner-occupied homes. It also means making homes more energy efficient through our weatherization program beginning this fall.

All of this activity is taking place in targeted neighborhoods where we are able to partner with local churches, foundations, schools, nonprofits and government agencies to maximize our impact. We're not trying to solve the problem of substandard housing alone. Instead, we are focusing on specific neighborhoods where we can have a greater impact by partnering with others. None of our work is happening in a vacuum, so it is vitally important that we collaborate and build on one-another's strengths. Now is the time to set aside any "turf" clashes or battles over anything except creating stronger neighborhoods. Habitat for Humanity is only one spoke in the wheel of building sustainable communities. You are a part of it, too.

Where Nehemiah relied on engineers and stone, we rely on volunteers and collaboration. You and I may not be able to individually transform a neighborhood from blight to new life, but through working together in partnership and by true collaboration, we can accomplish quite a lot.

Let's stop looking backward. The past is gone. New jobs will be created. Old communities are being rebuilt. A new history is being written starting now, and we are the authors. And if true community is our goal, then our vision is divine.

So let us start rebuilding.

The U.S. Green Building Council is a coalition of leaders from across the building industry working to promote environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live and work. The West Michigan Chapter provides and develops leadership through affiliations and education at all levels. Please send comments and column proposals to chuck.otto1@gmail.com.

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