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USGBC's Rick Fedrizzi Kicks Off Healthy Buildings 2009

What's more important than the air we breathe? This question, among others, is the focus of the Ninth International Healthy Buildings Conference that started with an enthusiastic kick off event on Sunday, September 13, at the Civic Center at Oncenter in Downtown Syracuse. The conference, hosted by the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems, has brought in industry leaders, academics, and researchers from around the world. Rick Fedrizzi provided the opening plenary speech for the conference, calling on over 900 delegates from 45 different countries across the globe to think about the impacts that advancements in technology and the building industries have on the individuals who inhabit the spaces we build.

Fedrizzi is the President, CEO, and Founding Chairman of the US Green Building Council (USGBC). The organization is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit committed to a prosperous and sustainable future for our nation through cost-efficient and energy-saving green buildings. The USGBC promotes the adoption of green building practices through the implementation of the LEED Rating System, public policy advocacy, and the promotion of educational opportunities. The organization has also been working internationally with the Chinese Ministry of Construction to create the China Green Building Council.

Fedrizzi's dedication to the advancement of green building, experience, and intimate knowledge of the Central New York region as a long time resident of Westvale, provided for a diverse and exciting speech. Speaking of the area, he said, "This conference is really a first for Syracuse. I've seen a number of conferences, but when you talk about a conference dedicated to the kind of activities that hopefully this city and Central New York will be known for in the next 50 to 100 years as the leaders in the world...this conference may in fact be the point of kickoff for all of that." Fedrizzi emphasized the importance of creating professional local, regional, and global collaborations between all members of the building industry in an effort to solve the climate challenges of today.

Many of the conference programs focus on indoor air quality and environments. "How is it the subject that basically started our conversation about green building, the need for significantly improved indoor environmental quality, has often fallen to the bottom of the agenda?" Fedrizzi asked. "How we interact with buildings, and they with us, defines an important relationship about how we interact with the world," he stated.

As one delegate agreed, "We need to make sure that the products man makes don't pollute the air we breathe. Not outside, we always focus on outdoor air. Unfortunately, indoor air is five times more polluted than outdoor air on average. Sometimes it is up to one hundred times more polluted, and it's from all the products that we actually make."

Fedrizzi quoted a story told to him by the late Ole Fanger, a former professor at Syracuse University and expert on the health effects of indoor environments to stress the importance of providing clean air. He said Fanger was amazed at the hazards that American parents unknowingly subject their babies to: "When your wife comes home and says you are going to have a baby, what do you do?" he quoted from Fanger. "You paint your walls, and you finish your floor, and you put down new carpet, and you put in new furniture and it's off-gassing volatile organic compounds. And then for security you close and lock the windows. You've now taken your baby and put it in the perfect gas chamber." Fedrizzi followed with, "Everyone one of us has done that. And sadly we may have had a very strong role in damaging that baby's lungs - when you look at the childhood asthma rates, those are the things that we have to keep in mind."

Fedrizzi expanded on this by emphasizing the importance of making our world's schools more sustainable. "People heal faster in green hospitals, they are more productive in green offices, they have fewer accidents in green factories and learn better in green schools," he said. We are at the forefront of establishing standards for improvements and no where is that more important than in schools. Fedrizzi stated that students in green schools perform, on average, twenty five percent better on tests. Yet, he said, we as builders, designers, architects, and engineers need to give our legislators the policy tools to make that happen. The USGBC, Fedrizzi mentioned, has launched the National Green Schools Campaign as a challenge to the building industry to provide green schools for all of our children within a generation.

Fedrizzi said of the speech, "I just want to raise the point that even though we feel we've come a long way, we are still at the very beginning and there is a lot of heavy lifting left to do. So, the fact that we can all start to share ideas and best practices, networking at great events like this, gives us the ability to take it to the next level."

-Nicolette Feldser, Ashley McGraw Architects, P.C., HB2009 Ground Reporter

Syracuse Center of Excellence (syracusecoe.org) is a collaborative organization of more than 200 businesses and institutions that creates innovations for sustainable built and urban environments. SyracuseCoE members work on research, development, and educational projects relating to clean and renewable energy, indoor environmental quality, and water resources.

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