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'Green buildings' good for environment, economy

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By Brad Wyche and Ann Timberlake

The South Carolina General Assembly deserves a big pat on the back for its overwhelming passage of the "Energy Independence and Sustainable Construction Act," otherwise known as the "Green Buildings Bill" (H. 3034). Despite Gov. Mark Sanford's veto, this legislation became law after a landslide vote of 90-13 in the House and a unanimous override vote in the Senate.

Two Upstate legislators, Sen. James Ritchie, R-Spartanburg, and Rep. Harry Cato, R-Travelers Rest, were instrumental in the bill's passage.

The act requires state-funded building projects over a certain size threshold to be built according to the environmentally friendly and energy efficient standards set forth by either the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Rating System or the Green Globes Rating System.

When it comes to green buildings, everyone wins: Savings on energy costs benefit the taxpayer; reducing the amount of coal-fired electricity to power these buildings benefits the environment; and measures encouraging the use of local materials benefit our economy.

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Despite the governor's misplaced fear of "mandates," the vast majority of our lawmakers know that our government can set standards for itself without disrupting the free market. Pro-business legislators like the bill's sponsors, Rep. Joan Brady, R-Columbia, and Ritchie, recognize that green buildings are not just about environmental responsibility -- they also make fiscal sense.

LEED-certified buildings typically only cost 1-4 percent more upfront to construct than regular buildings, and they pay for themselves within the first few years due to significant savings in energy and water. As one of many examples, a building with more natural lighting requires fewer light bulbs. And if those light bulbs are compact fluorescents (CFLs) instead of traditional bulbs, state taxpayers will save \$30, for each bulb, over the course of the bulb's lifetime.

Thanks to this bill, the State Engineering Office (SEO) will have the authority, and the incentive, to pursue these and other cost-saving measures. In cases where the benefits do not outweigh the costs, the SEO can waive the green certification requirement.

But there is another issue at work here. The impacts of climate change are already being felt in our state, and addressing these impacts will require a robust response on the part of both the private and public sectors.

To his credit, Gov. Sanford appointed a Climate, Energy and Commerce Advisory Committee to study the issue and make recommendations. In announcing the establishment of the committee in April, the governor stated: "When it comes to the action that South Carolina takes, I think we have a real opportunity to be leaders in the arena of addressing the potential effects of climate change and what we can do to impact it."

Thus, it was truly a shock that when presented with legislation that would actually make our state a leader in this arena, the governor vetoed it. Fortunately, the decisive override by the General Assembly has made that leadership a reality.
