

WHAT LEEDs TO GREEN?

By Rachel Langston

Since 1998, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) has worked to create “consistent standards for what constitutes a green building.” The result of those efforts is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System.

To date, this system includes criteria for the design, building and operation of nine different types of building projects, with criteria for two additional areas under development. According to the LEED Policy Manual, “LEED encourages and accelerates global adoption of sustainable green building and development practices through the creation and implementation of universally understood and accepted standards, tools and performance criteria.”

LEED CERTIFICATION

The main element of the LEED program is a certification process that allows building projects to receive official recognition for the level of certification they achieve in the entire building process. Worldwide, there are 926 certified projects and 7,590 registered projects attempting to gain certification.

Certification is available on four levels: certified, silver, gold and platinum. Each level indicates the amount of compliance a building project achieves. Because building projects vary greatly, LEED requirements are not the same for all projects. To receive certification, all projects must complete a list of prerequisites. Beyond that, projects are assigned a certification level by earning a percentage of core credits for their project type. The certification process takes 30 to 90 days for paperwork to be reviewed and a LEED rating to be awarded.

Currently, there are certification criteria for the following types of projects:

- new commercial construction and major renovation projects
- existing building operations and maintenance
- commercial interiors projects
- core and shell development projects
- houses
- neighborhood development projects
- multiple building and on-campus projects
- schools
- retail

LEED BENEFITS

There are a wide variety of benefits associated with green building and LEED certification. Green building has a positive impact on the environment by conserving valuable natural resources and reduces waste that would be created with more traditional forms of building.

From an economic perspective, green building gives the opportunity to reduce operating costs while enhancing the overall

value of the building itself. Additionally, buildings that have LEED certification may be eligible for tax and zoning incentives that traditional buildings do not receive.

Finally, there are community benefits which include a better work environment and positive feelings from the members of the community.

LEED ACCREDITED PROFESSIONALS

Another element of the LEED program is its professional accreditation. Becoming a LEED accredited professional involves exhibiting a thorough knowledge of green building and LEED requirements. Before becoming a LEED accredited professional, candidates must pass an accreditation exam to receive their official LEED AP Certificate. LEED accredited professionals can be found in all disciplines of the building industry.

The USGBC has only been collecting area of practice records since 2004. Currently, about 800 LEED accredited professionals list general contractor as their area of practice.

After becoming accredited, LEED accredited professionals serve on building project teams. One of their roles on the team is to provide information and guidance relevant to the LEED requirements and certification process. In effect, they help walk the building project through the entire certification process.

CONTRACTORS AND LEED

Contractors, with or without LEED accredited professional certification, play a vital role in any building project that is seeking to obtain LEED certification.

“Construction contractors can directly impact or manage more than 50 percent of the points needed for the basic LEED certified rating and 30 percent of the points needed for the platinum rating,” says Ashley Katz, USGBC communications coordinator. Contractors assist with the process by providing solutions for earning points, sharing knowledge of building methods and materials and by maintaining accurate documentation to show compliance with the LEED requirements.

LEED PLAQUES

When a building project completes the certification process, it is awarded a plaque to display the achievement. “The LEED rating system has become the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of performance green buildings,” Katz says. “The LEED certification serves as a nutrition label, of sorts. It shows building owners and managers what the building is made of, how much energy and water the building consumes, where the building materials came from and what the indoor environment is like.”

LEED certification is not free. Registration fees range from \$450-\$600. Actual certification fees are based on the type of building project being reviewed and the amount of square footage the building project contains. Currently, certification fees range from \$1250 to \$22,500. With additional criteria being developed all the time, these rates are subject to change.

In the long run, using the LEED guidelines to design, build, operate and certify a building should save more than it costs. And that is exactly what the USGBC is counting on. ♦

ABOUT the
AUTHOR

Rachel Langston is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala. She is the owner of RPL Communications, a freelance writing and desktop publishing company, and the author of “My Money Thinks” (www.mymoneythinks.com), a personal finance Web site.