

Building Labeling: The LEED Standard

Since 1993, U.S. Green Business Council (USGBC) has promoted the creation and certification of “green building” across the United States and the world. The organization has become hugely popular in an increasingly environmentally conscience society worried about our changing global climate, future energy and water demands, and human impacts on local environments. USGBC’s most notable program has been their Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification process by which governments, corporations, and other organizations can show their commitment to being environmentally conscience by getting USGBC stamp of approval on their buildings. The certification has four levels: basic certification (Bronze), Silver, Gold and Platinum.

USGBC is a private, non-profit, membership organization classified under §501(c)(3) of the IRC. The organization has 12,777 national membership companies, 79 local chapters with about 30,000 individual chapter members, and over 187,000 LEED certified professionals¹. Corporations such as REI, McDonalds, Target, Kohls, and even Jim Beam’s still house, and many more have recently been granted certification for their new buildings. Additionally the federal government, 35 state governments, and about 170 city governments require LEED certification for all new government buildings, and many offer tax credits for corporations willing to have their buildings certified. However, the USBGC has met criticism from governments, industry, environmental groups, and even LEED certified architects.

Some governments criticize LEED certification systems . These governments remain unwilling to adopt the certification for government buildings, and have even gone as far as to

¹ Kaplow, S. (2013, September 17). *LEED*. Retrieved September 24, 2013, from Green Building Law Update: <http://www.greenbuildinglawupdate.com/articles/leed-1/>

attempt to ban the certification in their areas². The main issue governments have is that the certification restricts building materials produced in their areas³. Another concern is that the certification is cost prohibitive and increases taxpayer money put into building new government buildings⁴. The main theme of this argument is that if a government wants to be environmentally friendly, it can simply adopt building standards for government projects that are equivalent to those of the LEED certification and reduce the costs of registration and certification through a third party.

Industry contends that the LEED certification process overshadows other sustainability projects that companies adopt in order to acknowledge consumer concerns. Environmental groups and others skeptical about the certification process believe that the certification does not go far enough to effectively produce more sustainable buildings, citing cases where certified buildings are no more environmentally friendly than non-certified buildings.

One of the largest critics is the architecture field itself. In order for a building to be LEED certified, the building plans must be reviewed by a LEED certified architect. Certification is granted by the Green Business Certification Institute, which requires those wishing to hold a certificate to pay additional testing fees. On top of that, certified architects run into budgeting issues with buildings they want certified. Registration to begin the LEED certification process costs over \$2,000 dollars. Additional time is needed to design for credits (how the building meets certification) of about eight hours a credit, so even a small project looking to get the minimum certification could cost \$20,000 in additional design, with larger projects increasing costs into the

² Badger, E. (2013, August 28). *Why Are Some States Trying to Ban LEED Green Building Standards*. Retrieved September 24, 2013, from Atlantic Times: <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/design/2013/08/why-are-some-states-trying-ban-leed-green-building-standards/6691/>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Editorial: Green revolution is more about cash than environment*. (2013, September 6). Retrieved September 24, 2013, from Times News: <http://www.timesnews.net/article/9067078/editorial-green-revolution-is-more-about-cash-than-environment>

six figures without including the added costs of purchasing building materials for the project that are often more expensive than traditional materials. Furthermore, the certification itself does not take into account all the factors that make a building sustainable or “green.” Any project is going to require new materials, labor, shipping etc., and these all have an adverse environmental effect with no guarantee that the end result will have reduced the building’s impact on the environment. It might be the case that the building is demolished, or needs another renovation a short time down the road just to keep up with new “green” standards.

The LEED certification standard isn’t perfect, but USGBC has certainly been successful in its goal of raising awareness about building impacts on the environment. It has made both government and industry more conscience of their impact on their surroundings and led the way in reforming the way we think about development.

Wes Knoll

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University of Oregon