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ENERGY EFFICIENCY: What does the owner of a LEED-certified building get? *(Tuesday, May 12, 2009)*

Saqib Rahim, E&E reporter

For many, the gold standard for "green" buildings can be summed up in one word: LEED.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design guidelines, established by the U.S. Green Building Council, have won worldwide popularity as a stamp of approval for green buildings. Its pseudo-Olympic rating system -- running from bronze, silver and gold to the highest level, platinum -- has popped up on buildings around the world, from offices downtown to sports arenas and churches.

But as the green-building movement expands to the wider public, some are beginning to question whether to keep following the LEED-er.

For a construction industry that has resisted change, they say, LEED has offered a quick fix: Plug in some costly components, tally up the points in LEED's rating system and then hang up a plaque to certify the building's "green" quality.

"The industry isn't able to necessarily produce performance results just by following a standard or code like LEED," asserted Tom Paladino, president of building consultancy Paladino and Co. He spoke in Washington, D.C., yesterday at a green-buildings forum sponsored by the World Environment Center.

"LEED is not really about intelligent thoughtful design, it's about checking a box that you have in fact achieved some of the goal," Paladino continued. "And I don't think the industry recognizes the difference between those two ideas."

In the LEED process, builders go through a checklist of criteria -- such as transit access, use of sustainable materials and reduced energy use -- and get points for each.

Is reducing long-term energy consumption the key?

It is a great way to promote the intent of green, some analysts said, but it doesn't force buildings to deliver. "You can get a lot of LEED points without building a building that will actually use a lot less energy, or for that matter, be greener with respect to its energy consumption," said Harvey Sachs, a fellow in the buildings program at the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy.

That is because the bulk of a building's energy use is not in its construction or the materials used to build it. Rather, 85 to 90 percent of its energy profile is in daily operations like heating and lighting, Sachs said, referring to a Green Buildings Initiative

study.

Sachs and other analysts said LEED awards its label before a building has proven that its "green" design actually reduces energy use.

"Historically, up until about a year ago ... the reality was that they weren't getting necessarily the energy performance if they got the points," said John Jennings, new construction market manager at BetterBricks, a consultancy for green builders based in the Pacific Northwest.

That is different from programs like U.S. EPA's Energy Star program, which certifies buildings only after comparing their utility bills to similar buildings. If a building performs better than its peers by a certain amount, then the government awards it an Energy Star label, like a professor curving an exam.

Jennings said the U.S. Green Building Council has recognized the issue, commissioning a study that found its buildings were not saving as much energy as their blueprints suggested. He said future LEED standards might reflect this by tightening up performance measures.

Or is it leadership and pioneering policies that are rewarded?

Jason Hartke, director of state and local advocacy for the U.S. Green Building Council, countered that LEED remains relevant as a way to promote high-end buildings. "It's got 'leadership' in the title for a reason," he said. "But I think there's also tiers in the rating system to allow for different levels of achievement as it relates to green building."

Environmentalists like Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, are also counting on the label to make the case to the public that green buildings are a crucial policy need.

She pointed to the recently announced retrofitting of the Empire State Building, which is trying to reach a Gold LEED certification. The experts behind the effort crunched the numbers, making sure to purchase fixes that would save the building money quickly.

"It's not just how they do it ... it's how they're measuring success and then sharing that with everybody else," Beinecke said. "LEED has demonstrated what's possible, which facilitates the enactment of the policy."

Meanwhile, others are striking out to make a building without LEED or any other standard in mind -- just energy. When he met with a client in San Jose, Calif., one green building specialist said the client had little interest in points and plaques.

According to Clay Nesler, vice president of global energy and sustainability at Johnson Controls Inc., here is what the client said: "There's plenty of green buildings, but that's not what I want. ... I want a building that has zero environmental impact. And I'm very concerned about climate and I'm very concerned about carbon. I'm going to go get zero energy, and I am not going to chase points, right?"

The result was a retrofitted office building that performed 40 percent better than California's code -- among the strongest in the country. When the last person leaves the office, a "kill switch" reduces the entire building's energy use to exactly zero -- not even the plugged-in computers can drink in a single electron.

It is an example of how some in the green-building movement are building in ways that would win points in the LEED system but without making LEED the primary goal, Jennings said.

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