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LAW OF THE LAND

LEED-ND Pilot Rating System Establishes New Building Guidelines

By Matthew J. Lawlor



AS ENERGY COSTS have risen and concern over the impacts of climate change continues to spread, the level of energy use and environmental impacts resulting from land development activity

has come under increased scrutiny. As a result, a variety of rating programs have emerged in the last decade seeking to quantify the level of environmental awareness and sensitivity in our built environment, with the goal of ultimately achieving a truly sustainable design and construction sector.

First launched by the United States Green Building Council in 1999 with an exclusive focus on new commercial construction, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System has become the most popular national standard for demonstrating that a building and its surrounding site have been designed and will function in a sustainable manner. Such a commitment at the building and site levels

MATTHEW J. LAWLOR is an attorney at the Boston office of Robinson & Cole LLP (www.rc.com), a commercial law firm with eight offices in the Northeast and Florida. Lawlor is a member of the firm's LandLaw Section, where he focuses his practice on representing developers, landowners, local governments and advocacy groups in matters involving multifamily residential, mixed-use and commercial development and leasing.

can be demonstrated by incorporating a variety of components such as, among many others, low-emitting building materials and finishes, solar orientation, regionally-produced products, certified wood floors, green roofs, water efficient landscaping, and renewable source power generation for heating and air-conditioning systems.

Although LEED for New Construction, or LEED-NC, remains the best known and most popular of the LEED products, there is an ever-growing list of certifications available, including LEED for Homes, LEED for Commercial Interiors, LEED for Existing Buildings and LEED for Retail. LEED has also recently started to become integrated into the development review process in an increasing number of municipalities across the country: being actually LEED certified or certifiable is now a prerequisite to local approval for new development projects in several cities across the country. That list includes Boston, where new developments or major renovation projects subject to large-project review under Article 80B of the Boston Zoning Code must now demonstrate green-building compliance under a new Article 37, whose standards are based on LEED and specially designed Boston Green Building Credits.

The growth in the popularity of LEED over the last decade did not, however, come without a certain amount of criticism from a variety of sources. While some focused on the effort and expense of obtaining certification and others observed that the system suffered from the same drawback as all rating systems and could be gamed into rating buildings more highly than might be considered appropriate, one of the more resonant critiques came from the smart-growth/new urbanist movements in real estate develop-

ment and urban planning. To those critics, LEED told only half the story by focusing on buildings and sites in isolation and not considering their context. What real benefit was a green building, critics asked, if that building was located at a site that is reachable only by private automobile and therefore required expending a significant amount of energy in transportation, in some cases to the extent that such energy use could offset the gains supposedly resulting from the green building itself?

Smart-growth/new urbanist critics also took the system to task for failing to meaningfully incorporate the urban design and connectivity elements that make densely developed neighborhoods and work places, which have been found to have inherent energy use-reduction as well as public health benefits, more successful. To critics, relating a green building to its context, especially other buildings and public spaces such as streets, was a critical piece of the puzzle.

Setting Standards

In response, in 2004 the USGBC formed a core committee for a new LEED rating system to be denoted with the suffix "ND" for Neighborhood Development in 2004. According to the USGBC's Web site, "LEED for Neighborhood Development integrates the principles of smart growth, new urbanism and green building into the first national standard for neighborhood design." Included on the core committee were representatives from USGBC as well as the National Resources Defense Council and the Congress for the New Urbanism. Early last year, after hashing out compromises on a wide range of critical issues, the LEED-ND pilot program

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was launched and several hundred projects were submitted to be part of the program. The rating system available under the pilot program contains 62 total components: nine prerequisites and 56 credit elements of various weights.

The prerequisites and credits are organized into three broad categories: Smart Location & Linkage, Neighborhood Pattern & Design, and Green Construction & Technology, with an extra-credit category labeled Innovation & Design Process. Two-thirds of the prerequisites are categorized under Smart Location & Linkage. The 106 total credit points are spread among the categories as follows: 30 points for Smart Location & Linkage; 39 points for Neighborhood Pattern and Design; 31 points for Green Construction & Technology; and 6 points for Innovation & Design Process.

The Smart Location & Linkage prerequisites, which have drawn some of the greatest attention so far, are: Smart Location; Proximity to Water and Wastewater Infrastructure; Imperiled Species and Ecological Communities; Wetland and Water Body Conservation; Farmland Conservation; and Floodplain Avoidance. It should not be surprising that the bias in LEED-ND is toward infill development and redevelopment, where transit and other infrastructure is already available, relatively few endangered species and habitats are likely to be found, and where farmland and floodplains can be avoided or at least not newly developed. Although there are many development loca-

tions that will not pass easily muster under these prerequisites, there is a potential to substitute project-specific analysis in the event that a particular project site does not meet the pre-determined smart location prerequisite on its own. Similar trade-offs are evidenced throughout the pilot rating system's prerequisites and credits. While the core committee undertakes its revisions, which are currently underway as part of the pilot phase, USGBC is encouraging anyone interested in participating as part of the LEED-ND corresponding committee to send an e-mail making that request to nd@committees.usgbc.org.

As with all of the LEED rating systems, projects in the pilot program are being rated on a sliding scale from Platinum down through Gold and Silver to LEED-ND-certified, the lowest level at which a project is recognized as meeting the standards. Projects may be of any size and may seek certification at any of three stages in development: Pre-Review (before permits and approvals have been obtained); Approved Plan (after permits and approvals have been obtained but before construction); and Completed Neighborhood Development.

Of the 238 projects selected for participation in the pilot program, 13 are in New England. Earlier this month, 10 of those projects – American Locomotive Works (Providence, R.I.), Evans Flats (Peterborough, N.H.), Gilbert and Bennett Wire Mill (Redding, Conn.), Jackson Square (Jamaica Plain/Roxbury), MetroGreen (Stamford, Conn.), Simsbury River Oaks (Simsbury, Conn.), South-

field (Weymouth/Abington/Rockland), Storrs Center (Mansfield, Conn.), Waterfront Square at Revere Beach (Revere), and Westwood Station (Westwood) – were featured in a workshop organized by Region 1 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an early funder of the LEED-ND core committee's efforts, the New England Chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Planning Association, in coordination with the Green Roundtable, USGBC's Boston affiliate. Almost 200 professionals, ranging from municipal planners to developers, architects, engineers and other consultants, attended.

Although the workshop produced helpful feedback to core committee members in attendance and introduced the program to many for the first time, an overarching theme among the project presenters was the value they have already gained in the permitting and approval process from being in the pilot program and the further value they anticipate in marketing their developments as green, sustainable, LEED-certified projects once they are built and ready for occupancy. As the pilot project phase continues throughout 2008 and the core committee readies the fully formed rating system for USGBC approval and "launch" in 2009, it appears that interest in LEED-ND will only increase and members of the real estate development community will have a new tool for demonstrating that their projects will support, rather than hinder, sustainability going forward. ■

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