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Recent Updates to the LEED Program

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Introduction

In 1998, the United States Green Building Council ("USGBC") launched the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design ("LEED") program to measure the sustainability of buildings. The LEED program is now the most widely utilized and accepted "green building" certification program in the country, with almost 21,000 registered projects (5 billion square feet). In fact, 98% of all green certified buildings have been registered with the LEED program. In hopes of addressing several common criticisms of the LEED program – including confusing documentation requirements, project review delays, and a lack of follow-up reporting – the USGBC recently rolled out the program's newest version, LEED v3.

LEED v3 has several important components, including revisions to the green building rating system, updates to the online tool that supports project certifications, and changes to administration of the certification process. These changes, meant primarily to harmonize the system and intensify LEED's focus on climate change, should beneficially impact the certification standards. Further, the enhancements in the technological platform – coupled with the administrative changes in certification and accreditation – should result in a substantially more efficient certification process.

Rating System Updates/Revisions

The LEED program consists of nine certifications: new construction and renovation

("LEED-NC"), commercial interior construction ("LEED-CI"), core and shell construction ("LEED-CS"), school construction ("LEED-SCHOOLS"), home construction ("LEED-HOMES"), retail construction ("LEED-RETAIL"), neighborhood development ("LEED-ND"), healthcare construction ("LEED-HC"), and existing building operation and maintenance ("LEED-EB:O&M"). LEED certification operates on a point-based system in which certain categories allow for certain points, the aggregate of which composes the total number of points available in one of the LEED certifications. The categories are innovation in design, indoor environmental quality, material and resource, energy and atmosphere, water efficiency, and sustainability of the site.

The previous versions of LEED had different points available for different types of buildings (e.g., LEED-NC was based on a 69-point system whereas LEED-CI used a 57-point system). As a result, certification was based on a percentage of total available points. The standard LEED certification required a building to get 40% of the points, while Silver certification required 50%, Gold 60%, and Platinum 80%. Since the point values were incomparable between building types, it was difficult to compare similar categories under different certifications. LEED v3 standardized the point system to be out of a fixed 100 points, with the necessary percentages converting into their numerical value (e.g., standard certification requires 40 points, Silver 50 points, etc.).

LEED v3 reallocates points among the individual criteria in order to favor design strategies that address climate change. For example, strategies intended to increase energy efficiency and the reliance on renewable power now can earn twice as many points as before (26 from 13), and a location close to public transportation can be worth as many as six points – up from one point. LEED v3 did not abolish any past criteria, even those with relatively negligible environmental impact. Rather, LEED v3 allocated as few as one point to those now-defunct criteria.

LEED v3 further increased the baseline requirements for certain criteria, specifically water conservation. LEED previously awarded points for water-use reduction beyond 20%. Now, any building seeking certification must achieve a 20% reduction, with a 30% reduction needed to start accumulating points. These evolutions in the LEED system are largely the result of increased technologies and a better understanding of green construction. Furthermore, in order to address conflicts between LEED versions that included similar language, LEED v3 undertook a process of harmonization whereby it revised similar credits in the various certifications so that they cite the same standards. This change should make LEED v3 more user-friendly than its predecessors, particularly for individuals who simultaneously work on multiple projects of diverse types.

Another interesting addition to LEED certification is the implementation of extra-credit points for projects that adapt to local conditions. These regional credits provide added incentive for developers and designers to consider the local environmental impact of any new developments. For example, in Michigan, projects in rural areas can earn extra points for preserving agricultural land, reducing light pollution, and minimizing storm-water runoff into the Great Lakes.

Lastly, a major concern with the LEED program

is the lack of follow-up accountability, and the USGBC hopes that LEED-EB will sufficiently address this concern. Unlike every other LEED certification, the newly created LEED-EB:O&M can be acquired in conjunction with other LEED certifications. The hope is that LEED-EB:O&M will allow the USGBC to continually monitor a building's performance beyond the date of certification.

Updates to the Online Software

The USGBC worked closely with software companies SAP and Adobe to develop the new LEED Online. Hopefully, the several million dollars spent on the development of LEED Online will result in a faster and more stable application. The USGBC further hopes the new application will facilitate communication between the project reviewer and the project team. The new LEED Online was designed to be much more user-friendly with regard to all users, particularly USGBC staff, reviewers, and project administrators.

Changes to Certification Process and LEED AP

The final major changes of LEED v3 are an overhaul of the project certification process and the program for qualifying LEED Accredited Professionals ("LEED AP"). With the implementation of LEED v3, the USGBC officially moves the administration of the certification and AP programs to the Green Building Certification Institute ("GBCI"), a nonprofit organization spun off in 2007. Under the old system, independent contractors were responsible for reviewing LEED project submissions (in conjunction with USGBC review). Now, GBCI will manage 10 organizations specializing in various elements of review (including Underwriters Laboratories and Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance). GBCI will therefore, be responsible for delegation and oversight of the entire project review process. This new system should help alleviate, if not remove altogether, the largely criticized certification delays of previous LEED programs.

LEED v3 also institutes several changes to LEED AP, although these changes are expected to phase in during the next year or so. One major expected change is the institution of the new three-tiered system of credentials. The lowest tier will be the LEED Green Associate, a certification intended for non-technical professionals or students who wish to demonstrate commitment to and knowledge of green building practices but may not necessarily be involved in the actual design and development stages. The middle tier will likely be the equivalent of a current AP credential but will allow specialization in any of the LEED categories, such as LEED-NC or LEED-SCHOOLS. The highest tier of credentials will be the LEED Fellow, which will designate an "elite" expertise in the field. The process for becoming accredited is expected to change as well. Green Associates will be required to take only a general sustainability exam, whereas APs will be required to take one of five specialty exams in addition to the general exam.

One contentious change in the new accreditation process is the requirement for continuing education requirements. Under the new plan, Green Associates may be required to take as many as 15 hours annually and AP's may be required to take as many as 30 hours

annually. Although the GBCI hasn't provided any details on the types of courses required, many expect that there should be significant overlap between other professional continuing education requirements and the GBCI's.

Important Deadlines

Projects already registered under LEED v2 may currently be transferred to LEED v3. This transfer is free of charge up until **January 1, 2010**. Projects that remain under LEED v2 will be unable to use the new version of LEED Online. Although LEED v3 is currently in place, new projects can still register under LEED v2 up until **June 26, 2009**.

Conclusion

By updating and revising the rating system, enhancing the technical platform for certification, addressing the common problems with the certification process, and developing a more comprehensive accreditation system, the USGBC has positioned LEED v3 to continue to remain the leader in green building certification. LEED's increased focus on climate change and regional accountability indicates that the LEED program is both capable and willing to evolve with growing market acceptance and changing environmental necessities.



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