The Green Building and Smart Growth Connection

By John Van Gieson
Green building advocates, new urbanists, and environmentalists have joined forces to merge their individual interests with their common interest in promoting Smart Growth and fighting sprawl into national standards for neighborhood development.

Starting about four years ago, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Congress for the New Urbanism opened discussions with the Green Building Council about creating a national neighborhood development certification program similar to other Green Building Council certification programs. The Green Building Council has had the Green Building Ratings Systems since 2000.

“We wanted to incentivize a good location, good development and good environmental practices,” said Kaid Benfield, director of Smart Growth for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

With considerable input from other groups, the three organizations developed the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) ratings system and have launched a pilot program to test the certification standards.

Jennifer Henry, program manager of LEED for Neighborhood Development at the Green Building Council, said the standards incorporate the principles of Smart Growth, new urbanism and green building and are designed to encourage developers to build better projects.

“The first linkage is where you put your development in relation to transportation,” Henry said. “The second is neighborhood patterns and design. How you lay out the streets; how compact and workable is your design; and does it live up to the principles of new urbanism and Smart Growth? The third is green building and technology. How energy efficient is your building going to be?”

The development

Developing the LEED-ND standards involved an enormous amount of work. A Core Committee comprising members of the three organizations and supportive groups released a preliminary version of the ratings in 2005 and revised them after receiving more than 4,000 suggestions during a comment period. Earlier this year, the Green Building Council launched the pilot project, soliciting applications from developers who want to be certified. The applications will be processed by teams of evaluators who will score projects on dozens of criteria.

The ratings are based on four broad areas: Smart Location and Linkage, Neighborhood Pattern and Design, Green Construction and Technology, and Innovation and Design Process. There are as many as 20 categories in each of the four areas. Most of the categories are worth a single point, but the ratings place special emphasis on issues such as location, reduced dependence on automobiles, compact development and walkable neighborhoods by awarding up to 10 points in those areas.

Under Neighborhood Pattern and Design, as one example, some of the standards that will be considered by the evaluators are affordable for-sale and rental housing, parking, walkable streets and access to public spaces. The complete standards are laid out in the file “LEED for Neighborhood Development Rating System Pilot Version” on the Green Building Council Web site, www.usgbc.org.
Evaluators will assign up to 106 points to projects applying for LEED-ND certification. There are four certification levels: Platinum (80 to 106 points); Gold (60 to 79 points); Silver (50 to 59 points); and Certified (40 to 49 points). The higher the score, obviously, the more the developer can crow about it. Developers who don’t like their score have the option of changing their plans and resubmitting their applications.

“It’s designed with the idea that there’s feedback, and the ratings can be improved,” said Susan Mudd of Chicago, an environmental lawyer who represented the Congress for the New Urbanism on the Core Committee.

Evaluating the applications is likely to be a time-consuming job. Henry said, it will probably be the end of this year or early 2008 before ratings are released. The ratings will be modified after another comment period and won’t be finalized until 2009, she said. Hopefully, Mudd added, that will involve tweaking, not rewriting, the ratings.

What do the designers hope LEED-ND will accomplish? Basically they want to create a powerful incentive for developers to design mixed-use neighborhoods that are compact, close to transportation, attractive and green.

“It gives developers a certificate of authenticity that this is really a green development,” said Tom Richman, a Palo Alto, Calif., urban design consultant who represented the Congress for the New Urbanism on the Core Committee. “It will move the market toward better design. It will give a competitive advantage for neighborhoods that are really environmentally sound and nice places to live, and the third thing is that it will protect the well-intentioned developers in the public process.”

LEED-ND certification will save developers time and money as they work their plans through the local government approval process, Richman said, because it will tell local officials that the proposed development meets national standards for quality neighborhood development. It will also give developers an effective tool to overcome the objections of people who abuse the process to oppose growth, he said.

“What happens so often is that people who are against any growth, the NIMBYs if you will, object to development on the basis of the environment, but they’re really just against growth,” Richman said. He said the LEED-ND certification “will help to clarify the conversation when there is opposition. Is it really environmental stewardship, or is it just anti-development?”

The results

Although it will be months before the results of the first round of ratings are known, there are neighborhood developments around the country that Smart Growth experts think meet with LEED-ND standards. Geoff Anderson, director of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Development, Community and Environment Stapleton near Denver, Colorado Photo provided by U.S. EPA
Division, said two excellent examples are Atlantic Station, a mixed-use brownfield redevelopment on the site of an old steel mill in Atlanta’s Midtown neighborhood, and Orenco Station, a new neighborhood built on open space next to a light rail station near Portland, Ore.

Another example may be Old Town Wichita, a public-private partnership that redeveloped a blighted warehouse district in downtown Wichita, Kan. Old Town Wichita won the 2006 EPA National Award for Smart Growth Achievement in the Built Environment category.

Atlantic Station is a 138-acre site bordering one of Atlanta’s infamously congested freeways. It’s touted as the largest urban brownfield redevelopment in the country. The developers, AIG Global Real Estate Investment and Jacoby Development, Inc., removed about 165,000 tons of contaminated materials to prepare the site for development.

The project includes office towers, hotels, trendy retail stores, high-rise condos, lofts, apartments and single-family homes. There’s even a building that rents apartments to students attending nearby Georgia Tech, Georgia State University and Atlanta’s historically black colleges. A shuttle that connects Atlantic Station with the nearest Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority rapid transit station hauled 900,000 people last year, doubling ridership projections.

Brian Leary, vice president of design and development for Atlantic Station LLC, said the developers ensured from the beginning that Atlantic Station met Smart Growth, new urbanist and green building standards.

“We see it really as a value-added statement,” Leary said. “To the market it says that it’s a good product.”

Orenco Station is a 190-acre new suburban community built on what was essentially a greenfield next to a light rail stop in Hillsboro, Ore., about 15 miles west of Portland. The community features a town center, office and retail space, and residential buildings ranging from single-family homes to condos to lofts and apartments.

The developer, PacTrust of Portland, originally

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Old Town Wichita
intended to build a commercial-industrial development on the site, but that changed when the city of Hillsboro was required to rezone the land for compact, mixed-use development to get funding for the light rail project. At that time, PacTrust had no experience developing residential communities, let alone new urbanist projects.

There was no such thing as LEED-ND when work on Orenco Station started about 10 years ago, but Dick Lofflemacher, director of residential development at PacTrust, said the company embraced Smart Growth principles because it wanted to do it right.

"Your infrastructure is very important and has to be very well done," he said. "People are paying a premium for a small lot and a small house, you better have something going on, otherwise they’re not showing up."

The Natural Resources Defense Council thinks there is something going on at this Oregon development, reporting in an article on its Web site that "Orenco Station is proof that traditional sprawling suburban development is not the only choice that sells well in the market."

Old Town Wichita is a 40-acre redevelopment of a warehouse district contaminated by groundwater pollution. The neighborhood features 690,000 square feet of retail and office space, numerous shops and restaurants, three museums and eight historic buildings that were rehabilitated for residential use.

The discovery of the contamination nearly brought the project to a halt as banks were reluctant to lend money to potential developers. The city of Wichita brought the project back to life by forming a public-private partnership with the prime developer, MarketPlace Properties. The city leveraged public funds to encourage redevelopment, and private investors poured more than $111 million into the neighborhood.

"Old Town is a testament to the effective use of public-private partnerships. Despite challenges, the partnership improved the environment and established Old Town as a charming community that capitalizes on the historic beauty of downtown Wichita," the EPA said in presenting a Smart Growth Award to Old Town Wichita.

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