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Fox Cities builders turning green into gold

Construction projects become LEED certified

By Susan Squires
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When it opens later this year, Lawrence University's \$35 million Richard and Margot Warch Campus Center will have a "living roof," with trays of soil and plants arranged in a grid to absorb rainwater and minimize stormwater runoff.

The 107,000-square-foot interior is formaldehyde-free, and high-efficiency toilets, faucets and showers will cut water consumption by 30 percent compared with typical fixtures. The building will use about 20 percent less energy than the industry standard.

The center is aiming for the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) silver-certification, one of the construction industry's most strenuous measures of a building's environmental friendliness.

The campus center, along with several Affinity Health System properties, Miron Construction Co.'s corporate headquarters expansion in the Town of Menasha, Time Warner Cable's new regional headquarters in Appleton and ThedaCare's new North Appleton Ambulatory Care Center, are part of a green construction wave expected total \$60 billion nationwide by 2010. Green, people in the industry say, has taken root.

"It is absolutely not a fad," says Paul Hoffman, CEO of Hoffman LLC, a construction and architectural firm headquartered in downtown Appleton. "It is absolutely not a trend that will subside over time."

LEED was developed to establish common standards for "green" construction. The system confers points for energy efficiency, using recycled materials, minimizing construction waste and incorporating natural light on a scale from "certified" to "platinum."

Of the 42 LEED-certified buildings in Wisconsin — buildings that have opened their doors — nearly all are schools, health care facilities, government offices or corporate headquarters.

"We see that institutions are very, very much involved with the whole sustainable movement because they intend to be around for a long period of time," Boldt Co. CEO Tom Boldt said. "Health care is a perfect example of that. They are dealing with the health of their patients and have a commitment to the community and it isn't short-term."

But other kinds of businesses are in line. More than 200 other buildings are

registered for LEED certification, including car dealerships, retail outlets, hotels, banks and manufacturing facilities.

“What I see is very exciting,” Boldt said. “It’s changing the ways in which people think. It’s raising up new methodologies of decision making.”

While Corey Brumbaugh, Miron’s vice president for business development, thinks a building can be “green” without LEED certification, getting the third-party stamp of approval on its addition is important to Miron.

“We expect it to be well utilized as an education tool for the community and our clients and our employees,” Brumbaugh said. “We’ll have the rating system and checklist up on our walls and we’ll actually show them what points are sustainable. ...We need to show we’re not just talking the talk, but walking the walk, too. To have a third-party evaluate it, it becomes objective instead of subjective.”

While the LEED certification carries with it a certain cache, and takes some of the guesswork out of what “green” means, it can be expensive. A study released in 2007 by Capital E Analytics, an energy consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., found that the minimum LEED certification adds about 0.6 percent to the cost of a building, while its highest rating, the platinum standard, adds about 6.8 percent to the bottom line. Also, according to the CoStar Group, a firm that tracks real estate trends, LEED-certified buildings sell for \$171 more per square foot than their traditional counterparts.

On the other hand, according to a study undertaken for the state of California, the benefits in reduced energy costs and higher productivity are worth between 10 and 15 times the difference in construction cost.

Some cities and states are mandating LEED certification for all new construction. Both Boldt and Hoffman think the certification should remain voluntary. While all that’s LEED may be green, not all that’s green is LEED. Hoffman’s new corporate headquarters in downtown Appleton, for example, isn’t LEED-certified, even though it uses material made from wheat-straw and sunflower hulls instead of wood in its cabinetry and banana fibers in the countertops.

“People think LEED equals sustainability,” Hoffman said. “It’s like saying a grade point equals an education. It’s just a measuring tool. ...We won’t talk anybody into LEED certification unless they can tell us how it will improve their business. LEED isn’t the only game in town.”

If standards become inflexible, Boldt fears, the green construction movement itself could become unsustainable.

“The thing that is troubling about all this stuff is, are we going down a path similar to what occurred in the quality movement, quality for quality’s sake,” Boldt said. “At the end, the company had a high-quality product that a select few people could buy. Then the business failed.”

Additional Facts

LEED-Certified buildings in the Fox Cities

- Affinity Health System, Greenville
- Affinity Health System, Little Chute

- Affinity Health System, Neenah
- Affinity Health System, Brillion
- Affinity Health System,

Appleton

Projects registered for certification:

- Good to Go Econvenience Centers, Grand Chute
 - Miron Construction Corporate Office, Neenah
 - Navarino Nature Center, Shiocton
 - North Appleton Ambulatory Care Center, Appleton
 - Kaukauna Utilities, Kaukauna
 - St. Elizabeth Hospital, Appleton
 - Time Warner Cable Northern Operations, Appleton
 - U.S. Oil Inc., Kimberly
 - Wolf River Community Savings Bank, Hortonville
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