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## MIDWEEK PERSPECTIVES

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### Green certification: Fix it or nix it

*The LEED process helps to encourage green building, but it's way too cumbersome*

Since its debut in 2000, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design designation—the pride and joy of the U.S. Green Building Council and the industry standard for certifying environmentally sustainable construction—has become a widely used yardstick not only for recognizing green buildings but also for comparing the green-ness of cities and regions.

For instance, Pittsburgh now has 17 LEED-certified buildings, ahead of Atlanta's 14 and not far behind Portland's 18 and Seattle's 20, according to the Green Building Alliance of Pittsburgh. This suggests what everyone is beginning to understand: The city of steel is becoming a city of green.

Not so fast, though. Increasingly, the LEED measure doesn't do Pittsburgh justice. Pittsburgh is building more environmentally sustainable buildings—and other cities are, as well—but they are not being recognized by LEED certification. Last November, Interior Design magazine reported that the Pittsburgh region had nearly 100 green building projects completed or under way, yet the city's official LEED number still sits at 17.

Why?

More and more builders and cities aren't bothering with LEED certification because, as Boston's chief of environmental and energy services, James W. Hunt III, acknowledged, "Many developers in the business community have raised

concerns that the LEED process can be lengthy, onerous in documentation and costly." LEED standards also are often applied inconsistently, if not capriciously.

It is no wonder then that Boston, as it became the first U.S. city last year to require all major construction projects to meet rigorous green-building standards modeled after LEED, refused to actually require LEED recognition.

To earn LEED certification, building managers must file separate paperwork for each of 69 categories, as well as, in many cases, follow-up documentation that may require months, often years, to compile and finalize. In an October 2005 study published by two Aspen, Colorado-based green-building proponents, Auden Schendler and Randy Udall, the authors noted that it took them two years to provide the documentation needed to LEED-certify the lighting in a golf clubhouse.

"By the time we submitted [the application], the form we had used was obsolete, a new credit interpretation rule had been issued, and our lighting guy had switched firms," Messrs. Schendler and Udall noted.

Many green-building projects have simply wilted beneath the paperwork. In 2004, the Green Building Council listed 93 buildings nationwide as LEED-compliant while another 1,100 awaited final review. Today, it lists 744 LEED-certified buildings, and the backlog has swelled to more than 5,300.

Worse still, the council can be grossly inconsistent in rewarding points toward LEED certification. When Pittsburgh's Green Building Alliance conducted an anonymous electronic survey of LEED Accredited Professionals, green-project team members and Pittsburgh-area Green Building Council members, one respondent mentioned receiving a LEED point for installing a \$395 bike rack while receiving an equivalent point for a \$1.3 million heat-recovery system that would help save \$500,000 annually in energy costs. "This must be corrected," the respondent commented.

Indeed, if LEED is to do its job of encouraging more ground-breaking green projects like the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, it must become a more consistent and credible measuring device.

The sheer cost of the process also creates a disincentive for certification. For developers, green means money. Mr. Schendler and Mr. Udall have estimated that the total cost of LEED certification—including registration, commissioning reviews and filing documentation—typically costs between 1 percent to 5 percent of a building project's budget. That's not chump change, although initial costs often can be recouped in energy savings over the long term. In 2004, after Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., paid \$300,000 in consultant fees to achieve LEED-certification for a dormi-

tory, it simply used the same blueprint for other buildings without bothering to certify them.

Smart move. But if builders and cities continue to step away from LEED, the Pittsburgh region, as well as the nation, will miss out on the benefits of having a universal yardstick for measuring, rewarding and encouraging green construction.

It's not just about pride and PR. As Rebecca Flora, executive director of the Green Building Alliance explained, third-party assurance of green construction can have added benefits, such as raising a building's value, improving loan-to-value ratios and lowering insurance premiums. "Why build LEED and not get it certified? You lose out on value down the road," Ms. Flora said.

Clearly, there is a need for a credible and efficient third-party green-construction certification system. And to its credit, the U.S. Green Building Council is continually trying to improve the LEED process. Still, if the council can't get LEED fixed before long, Pittsburgh and other cities seeking due recognition and benefits from their green-building efforts will have no choice but to turn elsewhere or devise their own.

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