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Public construction going green under new law

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The Green Buildings Act (2009-S 0232B), passed by the General Assembly in October and signed into law by governor Carcieri, requires that all new major public facility projects and major building renovations in Rhode Island, including schools, be designed and constructed in conformance with high performance green building standards.

The new law applies to new construction of more than 5,000 s/f and renovation of spaces greater than 10,000 s/f if such projects receive any funding from the state. The law takes effect immediately but will only apply to buildings entering the design phase after Jan. 1, 2010.

Under the law, building design must conform to the internationally recognized USGBC LEED rating system, or an equivalent high performance green building standard, including the Northeast Collaborative for High-Performance Schools Protocol.

Those standards are designed to promote a whole building approach to sustainability by recognizing performance in five key areas of human and environmental health: sustainable site development, energy and water efficiency, improved indoor air quality, and environmentally sensitive use of resources and materials selection.

At least 45 states and 195 localities nationwide have enacted LEED initiatives including legislation, executive orders, resolutions, ordinances, and policies, according to Connie McGreavy, founder and chairperson of the R.I. Green Building Council.

Besides increasing energy efficiency and reducing buildings' negative impacts on the environment, the standards provide for the health and well being of building occupants because they include air-quality improvements that reduce emissions of harmful greenhouse gases and other toxins while increasing the use of natural sunlight and improving acoustics. The standards also encourage siting buildings to encourage walkable communities accessible to clean transportation and require that building occupants be instructed in how to properly operate and maintain green buildings to maximize environmental features and benefits.

According to sponsor senator Louis DiPalma, the law was written to stand the test of time by allowing for the use of new versions of the standards as they develop. While the LEED standard is the most widely recognized green building rating system today, as technology and environmental science evolves, so, too, do the standards. Since the law allows for other equivalent high performance green building standards to be used, it will remain relevant until such time that best practices are mainstreamed into the state's building and energy conservation codes.

The state's Dept. of Administration will be required to publish an annual report documenting the operational savings resulting from the new law, and making recommendations for any changes in policy. The law also creates an advisory council that will provide insight into new policies and the application of its provisions.

The law does contain provisions for the state to set lesser standards for buildings where there are

no LEED or equivalent high performance green building standards appropriate for a certain type of project or for projects where there is no practical way to apply the standards.

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