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HUD puts grant money behind new LEED standard

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According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development the LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) will be used to score the location efficiency of grant applications. HUD will apply the LEED criteria to grant submissions to the upcoming Sustainable Communities Planning Grants and others, totaling \$3.25 billion in grant funds.

"Location efficient" neighborhoods are ones in which residents can walk easily from their homes to retail establishment, entertainment and recreational venues, schools, and public transportation. Residents of location-efficient neighborhoods don't need to drive as much as residents of less convenient locations, so they save money on transportation costs.

LEED-ND, a standard launched only in April as a benchmark for communities that generally include a significant multifamily residential component (besides retail and entertainment properties and places of work). According to the U.S. Green Building Council, the goal of LEED-ND is to help reduce sprawl, decrease automobile dependence, encourage healthy living (mainly through walking) and protect threatened species by discouraging Greenfield development-in other words, increasing the location efficiency of new neighborhoods.

HUD secretary Shaun Donovan said the grant criteria late last month in an address in Atlanta to a meeting the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), one of main organizations advocating green building. "Using the LEED-ND green neighborhood rating system CNU developed in partnership with the National Resources Defense Council and Green Building Council, it's time that federal dollars stopped encouraging sprawl and started lowering the barriers to the kind of sustainable development our country needs and our communities want," Donovan said during the speech. "And with \$3.25 billion at stake in these competitions, that's exactly what they will start to do."

In Donovan's view, sustainable building, especially in the context of neighborhoods, is as much focused on providing residents economic opportunity, as it is environmental benefits. He said that the need for sustainable communities is urgent in this economy, given that housing and transportation are the two biggest expenses for families, constituting for more than half of the average American household budget. Green communities, as defined by HUD, are "economically competitive, healthy and opportunity-rich."

"We've learned from foreclosure patterns that hidden costs like transportation can put families over the edge into increased financial vulnerability-and that tying the quality and location of housing to broader opportunities like access to good jobs, quality schools, and safe streets is essential to building sustainable communities," Donovan told the CNU.

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