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LEED for Neighborhood Development: Taking sustainability to the streets

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Over the past 20 years, sustainability has grown from a quirky idea into a mainstream movement. Reflecting this transition, the United States Green Building Council's (USGBC's) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program has evolved to encompass more than just new building construction. USGBC realized that sustainable building practices do not end at a building wall or property line, and that the full environmental impacts of a development also include a project's location, how it fits with the surrounding neighborhood, and how its inhabitants travel to and from a development's location.

Working with the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) and the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), USGBC developed the LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED ND) rating system to address sustainability at the neighborhood scale, taking into account external sustainability factors such as a project's location, community connectivity, and green building practices. The rating system is divided into three sections that align with NRDC, CNU, and USGBC principles.

The Smart Location and Linkage section assesses a project's location with respect to factors such as proximity to transit and reduced dependency on automobiles, location relative to existing development, remediation and development of brownfields, and proximity to wetlands, steep slopes, and floodplains.

Neighborhood Pattern and Design evaluates a project based on its walkability, density, mix of uses, street network pattern design, access to recreation facilities and open space, and streetscape design.

Green Infrastructure and Buildings examines items that are more consistent with the USGBC's other rating systems, such as the number of certified green buildings within the development, building energy efficiency, water efficiency (both inside and outside the building), stormwater management, wastewater management, heat island reduction, recycled content in infrastructure, and light pollution reduction.

Because LEED ND applies to projects that create a neighborhood, projects that apply for LEED ND certification typically include a number of buildings, a mix of uses, public open and/or recreational spaces, and transportation facilities. Due to the size of these projects and the long build-out time associated with them, the certification process differs from other LEED categories, involving three steps: Conditional Approval, Pre-Certified, and Certified status. Currently there are 381 LEED ND projects registered with USGBC worldwide. Twelve LEED ND projects are registered in Massachusetts, three of which have been certified to date: the Old Colony Public Housing Development in South Boston (LEED ND Gold), the Jackson Sq. Redevelopment project in Roxbury (LEED ND Silver), and Seaport Sq. in South Boston (LEED ND Gold) - all Nitsch projects.

The rating system is also being used as a guideline by regulatory officials. For example, the Devens Enterprise Commission recently revised their land development codes to incorporate LEED ND principles and is evaluating their larger projects for consistency with the rating system. As sustainability beyond buildings has gained momentum, LEED ND - along with similar or complementary rating systems such as the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI), the Institute of Sustainable Infrastructure (ISI) Envision Sustainable Infrastructure Rating System, and the Ecodistricts program - will help guide designers to re-invent neighborhoods to incorporate a higher level of sustainability.

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