



nerej

More points for problem properties - Rethinking LEED for brownfields

September 18, 2008 - Connecticut

With New England's convergence of property development hurdles - a rigorous environmental review process, rising energy prices, the ongoing focus on climate change, NIMBYism, and the credit crisis, to name just a few - more and more developers are investigating green building and low impact development (LID) strategies to improve their return on investment. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) guidelines are becoming the "green building" benchmark. According to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) which administers the program, LEED is being specified as a guideline in executive orders, legislation, policies and incentives in 78 cities, 28 states, and 12 federal agencies across the U.S. This trend is expected to grow as the economic benefits of high performance buildings are being realized due to rising energy costs.

However, the current LEED scoring system under values land reclamation, which is becoming more and more popular in Connecticut, Massachusetts and certain other old industrial states: the preservation of undeveloped land (greenfields) through a concerted effort to focus resources on the redevelopment of contaminated properties (brownfields).

EPA has noted that sustainable or green practices associated with the remediation and reuse of brownfields include conserving and recovering valuable materials, reducing impacts on air quality, and preserving natural resources and native vegetation. At the same time, however, these voluntary green initiatives may conflict with local building codes, state cleanup standards, and previously accepted remedial action plans. Planning and stakeholder education efforts are also required to overcome resistance to change by the several parties that could be involved with a contaminated site.

Under the LEED guidelines issued by the USGBC, projects earn ratings (Silver, Gold and Platinum) by amassing points for a variety of "green" building features (such as energy efficiency, use of renewable energy, healthy indoor air, etc.). Surprisingly, the redevelopment of brownfields, a key component of the "smart growth" strategy of Massachusetts and other New England states, counts for very little in the LEED calculus.

As an example of this disparity, consider the recently completed Kilby-Gardner-Hammond Street Neighborhood Revitalization Project in Worcester. The Main South Community Development Corporation used a mix of federal and state funding sources to reclaim a generally run-down section of this old industrial city. The project involved, in part, the demolition of five old mill buildings (complete with asbestos abatement, but also with the salvage of many of the building materials), the removal and proper disposal of a significant quantity of oil and hazardous materials, and the removal of a number of old underground storage tanks and PCB-laden electrical transformers. Following demolition, the site was regraded, and it is now the site of the new facility of the Worcester Boys and Girls Club; the remainder of the site is scheduled for reuse as a college track and playing field.

How would this major brownfields project, which converted an area of old underutilized buildings into a location for community and college recreational facilities, have fared under the current LEED scoring system? It would have received a single point for a LEED NC (New Construction) application, where 26 points are needed for certification and 69 points are possible. Incongruously, the same point could have been gained by including within the project bicycle racks to encourage low-impact travel.

At this year's EPA Brownfields 2008 Conference in Detroit, GZA moderated a roundtable focus group attended by engineers, consultants, attorneys, brownfield owners, regulators, developers and architects from across the country. Perhaps not surprisingly, a poll of the audience of over 100 showed nearly unanimous agreement that 1 point is not sufficient incentive to reward the brownfield redevelopment process.

As it happens, the USGBC is currently in the process of updating and revising the LEED certification system, so there is an opportunity to recommend a more appropriate LEED point value for buildings built on brownfield sites. For the new LEED scoring system, the USGBC is moving toward a 100-point scale, with 10 regional and innovative bonus points possible.

In 2008, the USGBC simply does not reward the applicant for addressing the complexity of the brownfield remediation effort in the rating system for new construction. While LEED 2009 proposes to re-allocate points based on the potential to either mitigate negative or promote positive environmental impacts, risk and reward still seem out of balance for brownfields; this may be due to the historic USGBC focus of LEED on rewarding building interior and exterior designs more than the recycling of property.

The USGBC is a consensus-building organization, and correspondence groups and review committees are the means for effecting changes to the new guidelines. However, the public comment period closed in early September and the guidelines are expected to be finalized in time for the November 19-21 Greenbuild Boston Conference and become effective in January 2009.

Lawrence Feldman, LSP, is a senior principal working out of GZA's Boston and Norwood offices; Wayne Cobleigh, CPSM, is manager of project development at GZA's Bloomfield, Conn. office.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540