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The changing climate of green building priorities

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The year 2009 brings with it significant changes - a new administration, an economy in crisis and a rising cultural awareness of environmental issues. It will mean changes for the building industry as people look for new ways of doing business, developing projects and engaging in green design. In recent years, the activities around green building have been predominantly focused on new construction or major renovations. This is no longer the case. Given the market, the economy, the costs of fuel and the growing awareness of environmental issues, people are now focusing on fixing what they own. Considering that roughly 75% of major metropolitan areas in New England are already constructed, there is a huge infrastructure that needs to be upgraded and improved upon. Taking into account the energy markets and the economy, it also means designers, builders and developers are finally paying serious attention to the most significant piece of the building energy puzzle. It's certainly easier and more exciting to look at new building design but the opportunities abound to address our existing building projects and energy infrastructure. In addition, there has been a recent shift in the dialogue towards carbon and the concept of zero net energy buildings.

These shifts are being reflected in the market in different ways. First, policies around the country are starting to address building operations, not just new construction. There is now a heightened awareness to design with future operations in mind. This is a radical difference from earlier days, when the cost and burden of building operation was not considered during design. Architects and design teams are beginning to incorporate life-cycle cost decisions into early design and take greater responsibility for the full life of the building.

Here in Mass., the governor's Zero Net Energy Buildings Task Force is developing specific recommendations for incentives, requirements, workforce development and metrics, which will be made public in the spring. Second, in the commercial real estate market, tenants are asking for green leases, green financing and many health and energy efficiency measures. REITs and other landlords are implementing green initiatives in order to raise the value of their portfolios as well as differentiate themselves to attract tenants. This is also leading to an opportunistic trend, where landlords and tenants are using commercial interior renovations as a chance to implement green choices. Third, tools, such as LEED continue to grow and gain recognition. LEED Existing Buildings Operations and Maintenance (EBOM) has been particularly sensitive to market demands, and with recent changes, has become more user-friendly. Both LEED-CI (commercial interiors) and EBOM have begun to dominate in this climate. This gives people a comprehensive framework and green building guide to help them understand and prioritize their project site, energy, water and material efforts.

As with any green initiative, the primary focus is on "low-hanging fruit," the actions that have the least up front cost, although in pursuing this strategy it's not always straight forward to determine what those opportunities are without financial and impact analysis. To be smart about it, a strategic

approach for this includes two first steps: understanding your baseline so that you can determine what actions would be low hanging fruit, and contacting the utilities early on so that you can take the best advantage of rebate and incentive programs. Once you have a baseline, you need to establish your investment parameters and what return you are expecting within a given time period. Then you can make decisions based on life cycle costs.

Smart property owners are committing now and taking actions. Some examples include moving towards building management systems which provide a higher level of systems control and energy analysis. Indoor air quality and ventilation demand control have become priority items because they contribute both to occupant health as well as reducing operational costs. Those who wait too long will inevitably be hit by regulatory requirements and will have to start on this path out of reaction. USGBC continues to improve their LEED rating system and the number of industries involved in making green building part of their business is growing by the day.

For resources and support on your project, there are a number of different places to look: professional associations such as International Facility Management Association (IFMA) and Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA), the USGBC website and LEED checklists online www.usgbc.org and the NEXUS Green Building Resource Center in Downtown Boston www.nexusboston.com.

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