

LEED Certification for Commercial Interiors

Clients frequently speak to architects about “green initiatives” within their companies, but their initiatives are often vague at best (“try to be green”). Some are willing to consider funding such initiatives, but many are only willing to “be green” if it doesn’t cost them money. Under the new criteria governing Tenant Improvement projects, LEED certification is more affordable than many believe and is a measurable means of a company’s commitment. LEED certification is often misunderstood and falsely associated with excessive costs that do not provide positive benefits for the client. As a result, many clients quickly dismiss the notion of certification before they truly understand the costs as well as the benefits.

The standard for evaluating sustainable design for Tenant Improvements (Commercial Interiors) is the relatively new criteria developed by the U.S. Green Building Council known as LEED for Commercial Interiors (LEED CI). LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. Some of the false notions mentioned above may stem from knowledge of

projects developed under the flagship LEED program known as LEED for New Construction (LEED NC). The NC criteria are applicable to new projects developed from the ground up.

The LEED CI criteria gives Tenants sustainable choices even when they don’t have control over the total building, and it may be applied to any Tenant Improvements project whether in a new or existing building. To become certified, a project must accumulate points in six environmental categories: 1) sustainable sites, 2) water efficiency, 3) energy and atmosphere, 4) materials and resources, 5) environmental quality and 6) innovation and design process. 57 total points are available with 21-26 being the basic certification level, 27-31 silver certification, 32-41 gold certification and 42-57 platinum certification.

In order to become certified, the project must meet certain prerequisites: fundamental commissioning of equipment, minimum energy performance, CFC reduction in HVAC&R equipment, storage and collection of recyclables, minimum indoor air quality performance and no smoking. Additionally the project must achieve a minimum of two



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points in the energy and atmosphere category. Once you have determined that these are achievable, a strategy for achieving certification at the lowest additional cost becomes an evaluation of the remaining 55 possible points to determine which points are most easily achieved and which points have the lowest cost premiums. A number of points may be immediately eliminated as high cost or simply unachievable. When tallying the “easy

points”, most projects will fall slightly short of the basic certification level (21 points). During the budget pricing exercise commonly performed at the beginning of most Tenant Improvement projects, it is possible to identify discrete pricing for the remaining LEED points believed to be “most affordable.” After receipt of the pricing, the strategy for certification (which additional points to pursue at the lowest cost premium) can be finalized for implementation during design development and construction drawings.

Yes, there are some costs associated with a number of the points, but many points are achievable at little to no cost. Often the notion of excessive costs, comes from attempts to achieve higher levels of certification (beyond basic certification) requiring some of the points with higher-cost premiums. Under the current LEED CI v 2.0 criteria, every point has the same value. The USGBC is in a pilot program for v 3.0 intended to be released in 2009, where there will be weighting of points to address the “inequities” of the non-weighted v 2.0 criteria. For instance, putting in a bike rack and installing expensive mechanical systems each bring 1 point under the 2.0 criteria.

So the strategies will evolve as the criteria changes.

When evaluating real estate options, the prerequisite criteria and the ability of the building’s mechanical systems to perform under the minimum energy standards (ASHRAE 90.1 2004) should be considered. If those can be met, the project can achieve certification. Many new buildings are “pre-certified” under core and shell making certification under the CI criteria even more affordable. Recent preliminary analysis of a project in a pre-certified building resulted in 16 points at no additional cost. The remaining 5 points needed for basic certification were attainable at only minor premiums to the total project cost.

When making the decision to certify or not, Tenants should be open-minded as achieving basic certification may be more affordable than you think. In addition to achieving your company’s green initiatives in a measurable way, you will benefit from lower operating and maintenance expenses and a healthy, more productive work environment. Of course the project will have a reduced carbon footprint as well. It’s the right thing to do!

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The design of this LEED CI certified space was centered around the “re-branding” of this 55 year old regional construction company. Combining new technologies and office design with their rich history and tradition, the new offices were designed to support the vision of the company, “to enrich the lives of our employees, clients, partners and the community.”