We’re five years into the modern green building era—as defined by the birth of U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system—and in that time America has seen exponential growth in green building and measurable impact, USGBC Vice President Tom Hicks told a packed house at Levin College on Feb. 6.

Out of 9,000 projects that have registered for LEED in the U.S., only 1,200 have been certified, Hicks says, adding that more will be as the group catches up to demand. To do so, USGBC formed a new group, the Green Building Certification Institute, to run its certification process and deal with the rising demand.

Environmental benefits of LEED-rated buildings include a 35-50% energy savings, a significant figure for a country that pumps more than one-third of its carbon into the air from buildings, Hicks says.

USGBC, the largest green building group in the U.S., is expanding its reach to 55 countries including India and Canada. The U.S. needs to set the example and share its lessons, Hicks said, with developing nations like India and China.

LEED for Neighborhood Development will help: Northeast Ohio’s four LEED-ND projects join 240 from six countries in a pilot program where design in and between private and public spaces encourages biking and walking to work, shop and play.

Expanding the scale of LEED to neighborhoods is starting to have an impact on urban design, Hicks says. It’s influencing how cities and states are dealing with regulatory obstacles, and, in some cases, its leading to incentives, green building policies or new efforts to encourage green design.

In Cleveland, for example, LEED-ND project coordinators and the city’s Office of Sustainability are forming a “green team” with department heads at City Hall to handle changes to codes and, perhaps, develop standards so that all developments in the city are green by nature.

Cities that have responded to LEED with incentives, requirements and new initiatives include:

- Gainesville, Florida – A 25% reduction of the permit fees for single family homes and fast track permitting for green buildings.
- Arlington, Virginia – Bonuses to allow for more density or height for all building types.
- Sarasota County, Florida – Requires county buildings to meet LEED standards, and offers fast track permitting to new commercial, residential or residential remodeling construction that meets USGBC standards.
- The State of Illinois – passed a Green Neighborhood Act that will provide three builders of LEED-ND developments grants of up to 1.5 percent of their total cost.

A family living in a LEED-ND neighborhood stands to cut annual costs by $3,148—savings from their well-designed, energy-efficient homes, the easier access they have to transit, jobs, schools, and recreation, according to the USGBC.

Savings and larger societal goals are at the core of Oberlin’s LEED-ND development, known as East College Street. Naomi Sabel, one of three recent graduates from Oberlin College’s Environmental Studies program who’s heading the project, the first for their Sustainable Community Association, told the Levin crowd that they chose to redevelop the site of a former Buick dealership into a mixed-use place because its vacancy has held back the small town center from rediscovering its vibrant, walkable...
roots. In addition, SCA has social equity in its mission, keeping one-third of the 36 residential units below market rate. Artists and small businesses will also find breaks on rent as SCA plans to carve out studios and incubation in the 19,000 sq. ft. of ground floor space.

To make Cleveland’s Flats East Bank a green neighborhood, the Wolstein Group hired Building Cleveland by Design to manage the LEED-ND process. The larger goal is to encourage connectedness and cohesiveness between the private developments (including Stonebridge) and all of the plans in the Flats District for grand public spaces.

BCbD will help FEB set and implement its LEED goals, and it will lead the design process for public spaces in the Flats District, such as a boardwalk along the river connecting FEB to a future Canal Basin Park, which will celebrate the terminus of the Towpath on 23 acres below the Detroit-Superior Bridge.

BCbD will shortly hire an urban design firm and conduct a public workshop to create a schematic design of how the public spaces will meet the objectives of promoting the ecology and industrial heritage of the Flats alongside new recreation and entertainment uses.

Just as important as growing the number of LEED projects, USGBC is adjusting many of LEED’s components from lessons taken from real world and geographic conditions, Hicks says. They include:

- Tightening the requirements to receive points for energy use by adding a prerequisite
- Considering a regional approach to rating that considers variation in climate and conditions (i.e. stronger water requirements for the Southwestern U.S. or stronger heating/energy requirements for the Midwest).
- A uniform 100 point scale for all rating systems (with the possibility of a weighted scale)
- Making the LEED credits more uniform across of LEED’s rating systems (so that a project can move between rating systems and credits will carry)
- An adjustment in the new LEED for Existing Buildings rating system that adds points or another prerequisite for reusing buildings and materials.

The value of LEED-ND in Northeast Ohio and to cities like Cleveland is in leveraging these pilot projects to blaze a path for more green neighborhoods. It begins with finding and removing the regulatory obstacles, but the larger goal, the big prize, is being an early adopter of green building standards, both in government buildings and community wide.

The GreenCityBlueLake network can help by assembling best practices from other places working on LEED projects here for consideration.

Resources

American Planning Association article on green zoning practices in the U.S. (pdf 7 MB)