



Sustainable food for thought

U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Green Building Operations and Maintenance standard made more accessible.

Monday, June 08, 2009 - Green building is all the rage, and rightly so. Resource shortages are a significant source of global conflict, and buildings consume 40 percent of all of the resources produced in the world. The potential to reduce emissions and improve environmental performance throughout the building sector is immense, nowhere more so than in the existing building inventory.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Green Building Operations and Maintenance standard (LEED EB O&M) has just been overhauled by the U.S. Green Building Council to make it more accessible. The new standard has made it onto the radar screens of many of the Fortune 500 companies' property portfolio managers for use in their building inventory. CB Richard Ellis, manager of 1.7 billion square feet of real estate globally, has committed to certifying 100 LEED EB O&M projects by the end of 2010.

Many of the LEED standards have an energy reduction strategy, and the newest addition to the LEED EB O&M standard is an energy reduction strategy called Sustainable Food. You may wonder what food has to do with green buildings, but sustainable food is actually quite complementary to a number of other strategies inherent in LEED to reduce the hydrocarbon footprint required to supply materials and people to a building.

A LEED project provides incentives to purchase building materials within a 500-mile radius of the site, enhancing local economies by keeping profits in the community. The same strategy applies to building operations. Therefore, it is a natural extension of this policy to extend to purchasing food sustainably. No matter the size of a business operation, at one time or another, food will be served at an event or a meeting.

The LEED EB Sustainable Food credit provides for the acquisition of sustainably harvested foods certified by pre-approved organizations including USDA Certified Organic, Food Alliance Certified, Protected Harvest Certified, The Rainforest Alliance, Fair Trade, and the Marine Stewardship Council's Blue Eco Label, and/or by acquisition of food within a 100-mile radius. The threshold for achieving this credit is for 25 percent of all food and beverages to meet one or more of these sustainability criteria. Double points are awarded if the product is both certified and locally harvested.

The Sustainable Food credit is not very complex. A template provided by the USGBC is maintained based on the cost of the materials. The cost premium can be moderate to none. A few vendors in the West Michigan area are already experimenting with the requirements of the credit. Their markets include buildings intending to certify as a LEED project, and organizations with a sustainability mission.

The Sustainable Food credit is positioned to transform the local agricultural economies, just as LEED has transformed the marketplace for construction materials. As demand builds for sustainable food, local suppliers will find reason to become accredited by pre-certified sustainable foods organizations, and to capitalize on the double bonus offered by the LEED system, creating competition in the agricultural sector to become more sustainable.

Food buyers will become more perceptive about purchasing regional materials, and vendors will find new markets for their products. Local vendors can capitalize on the reduced cost of transporting their product to market as energy costs consume more of their operating expenses.

Consider the Felt Mansion in Saugatuck, which is developing a sustainable menu for the weddings and corporate retreats it hosts. Patty Hoezee-Meyers has fully embraced the Sustainable Foods credit by working with local caterers. The vendors have been pleased to see a program that acknowledges the importance of locally grown produce. Minus some early issues regarding documentation, acceptance of the program is growing.

Patty's enthusiasm for sustainable food is founded in the historic context of the building site. The Felt Mansion was originally built to be nearly self-sufficient, with land that once supported gardens, vineyards, orchards and livestock.

The growing awareness of the connection between sustainable agriculture and individual health closely parallels the building research that ties the quality of indoor environments to the health of occupants. Now sustainable agriculture and sustainable building are linked to support healthy bodies in a healthy environment, for a sustainable future.

For a fascinating read on sustainable agriculture, pick up Michael Pollan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma."

The U.S. Green Building Council is a coalition of leaders from across the building industry working to promote environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live and work. The West Michigan Chapter provides and develops leadership through affiliations and education at all levels. Please send comments and column proposals to chuck.otto1@gmail.com.

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