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Coming Soon: A Bigger, Bolder U.S. Green Building Council

The Creator of the LEED Rating System Lays Out its Five-Year Plan

Looking to more fully embrace its role as standard-bearer for the nation's green building movement, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) released a strategic plan for the next five years that would broaden its mission far beyond sustainable building certification.

In the plan, released this month, the Washington, DC-based nonprofit pledges to accelerate green building market penetration by strengthening its commitments to engage in green building research and domestic policy, and prioritizing issues such as social equity and city planning in its agenda.

It also said it would trim implementation costs for achieving LEED certification, the green building rating system it created that has become the industry standard, however it did not specify how or when it would do this.

Overall, the strategic plan signals a recognition by USGBC that it now wields an unmatched level of influence in the green building industry -- there is no major competitor to LEED -- and that the pace of national green building progress will be determined largely by the level of its own ambition.

"USGBC is improving its penetration with state and local governments and pressing the issue of energy savings and economic savings. The message is taking off," said Tom Mawson, executive director of USGBC's National Capital Region chapter. "I think they're doing a pretty effective job."

To broaden its scope, USGBC is reallocating resources in some areas. The organization next year will begin outsourcing the LEED certification process as it looks to work down a backlog of more than 14,000 registered projects. It already outsources testing for its LEED-Accredited Professional designation, which 60,000 people have achieved.

Many of the issues USGBC says it needs to tackle -- or tackle more firmly -- were targeted as far back as its founding in 1993. For instance, its framework has always called for the advancement of green building research and development, which receives less federal funding today than it did in 1980, when adjusted for inflation.

But other issues, such as public policy, have emerged only recently as the powerful forces that are altering the green building landscape.

More than 14% of all U.S. cities with at least 50,000 people now have green building programs, according to the American Institute of Architects, including international business centers like New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Washington, DC. A number of policies on the state level also exist, and both presidential nominees have signaled a commitment to trim the energy intensity of the building sector in the near-term.

"Regulations at all levels of government will be a key driver of green building over the next five to 10 years," said Dan Burgoyne, the sustainability manager of the California Department of General Services' Green Team and a member of USGBC's Strategic Planning Committee.

Although USGBC identified the need to engage government on green building in its strategic plan for 2000-2005, it has adopted a mostly hands-off approach. The organization's role in developing green building policy in California -- which is recognized as a national leader in that arena -- has been "very limited" at

both the state and local level, according to Burgoyne.

So as the number of large cities with green building policies has risen -- AIA reported a rise of nearly 400% in the past five years -- USGBC has found itself somewhat uninvolved in that trend, even as more cities have eschewed incentives to mandate LEED compliance.

"USGBC created the LEED system to be voluntary and they thought that would be all that would be needed for a long, long time. They were surprised when so many jurisdictions started mandating LEED for public and, to a lesser extent, private buildings," said Cliff Majersik, a program director for the Washington, DC-based Institute for Market Transformation (IMT) who has advised the district in writing energy efficiency and green building policy.

Added Lauren Yarmuth, a principal and co-founder of YRG Sustainable Consultants who sits on USGBC's board of directors and served on the planning committee: "The policies are being established. And they're happening at this moment independently of USGBC -- and it doesn't make a lot of sense.

"It's mostly wanting to make sure that we can be at the table in those discussions and help [policy makers] do what they're trying to do," Yarmuth said.

According to Burgoyne, all levels of government would benefit from more guidance from USGBC. "Government faces some unique challenges that are different from most building owners," he said, such as large portfolios of new and existing buildings, and complicated budget cycles and funding processes.

"One of the most useful services the USGBC can provide government are tools and resources as well as technical support to help them manage the greening process of large portfolios of buildings, and to provide sample documents and training specialized for government," he said.

USGBC might also look to protect its own interests. Some cities, including Boston, have crafted private sector legislation that requires real estate projects to be LEED certifiable, rather than actually certified, which critics say undermines the LEED rating. The 'certifiable' status is "a little like saying that buildings must be greenish ... a weak gesture by city leaders to promote sustainable development in Boston," wrote Simi Hoque, a co-director of the nonprofit group Floodspace who is not affiliated with USGBC, in an article posted in March by GreenerBuildings.com.

USGBC will also navigate complex terrain to tackle other issues to which it has committed.

In breaching social equity, the organization said it wants to bring green building benefits to underserved populations and markets, such as affordable housing, which it is addressing in its new LEED for Neighborhood Development platform.

Issues like access to transportation, energy efficiency and indoor air quality are "critical to people of all incomes and all social positions," Yarmuth said.

"A whole other world can unfold with social equity issues. I don't necessarily think that's what we're getting into right now," she explained. "Bringing it into the strategic plan means that we can start to make sure that we're checking against it with everything we do moving forward."

Yet, more than any of those issues, perhaps the greatest challenge for USGBC moving forward, is one of its oldest challenges: convincing building owners to make their existing buildings less environmentally taxing.

With more than 60 billion square feet of existing commercial space, the built sector represents by far the greatest opportunity for environmental gains. But property owners and investors have been reluctant to perform retrofits due to payback periods that may exceed investment hold periods, as well as potential tenant displacement and lease agreements that essentially prevent the sharing of green retrofit costs and energy savings. "There's a huge inventory of existing buildings that owners and developers need to look at

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now and consider retrofits and renovations," Mawson said. "We're going to see growth on the [LEED for Existing Buildings] side of the rating system."

Although progress has been slow, that growth is beginning to occur: buildings certified under the LEED for Existing Buildings (LEED-EB) platform now number almost 2,000, up from less than 100 at the beginning of the year, according to USGBC tallies. LEED-EB has benefitted from a major upgrade by USGBC this year (the first version of LEED-EB received a chilly reception from the market for years after it was launched in 2004), as well as the publication of new research on the leasing and investment advantages of LEED buildings.

But LEED-EB-certified buildings still trail LEED-NC-certified buildings by a ratio of more than 4-to-1. And to complicate matters, LEED-NC buildings sometimes present their own set of challenges after joining the existing stock.

The sustainable design of LEED-NC buildings -- intended to maximize energy efficiency -- has been offset in some cases by improper management and operation of the building.

Frequently, after a LEED-NC building completes, "almost everybody involved with the design and construction goes away, and they don't feel any accountability or investment in what happens to the building, once it's gone into operation," Majersik said, which often leaves owners and managers to fend for themselves. "You have a huge loss of information and expertise about how you should be operating and maintaining this building."

"You can have the best designed building in the world, and if it's poorly operated and maintained, it's going to be a dog," he added.

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