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LEED the way to being green

System rates energy efficiency of buildings

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PATERSON —

Constructing a building isn't just about four walls and a roof anymore. At a time when astronomical energy costs are taking a heavy toll on individual consumers and entire cities, many builders are looking at a greener standard for what a building should be.

In 1998, the U.S. Green Building Council created the Leadership in Energy Efficient Design rating system as a way to evaluate the design, construction and operation of green buildings. Ten years later, many are starting to believe that green buildings won't be a novelty in the future.

"Energy costs are not going down. Carbon needs to be cut," said Andy Topinka, chairman of the New Jersey branch of the council. "We expect that in a period of time this will be come the norm."

In the LEED system, buildings are rated on a point system that quantifies various aspects of the building, from air quality to use of recycled materials to on-site renewable energy. A building must acquire a minimum number of points in order to become certified; higher levels of certifications are offered for more points scored.

In New Jersey, the number of LEED buildings isn't overwhelming — in the 10 years since the rating system was created, only 33 buildings have been certified, with an additional 220 registered.

But with the U.S. Green Building Council being the fastest-growing nonprofit in the world, Topinka has high hopes for the LEED system.

"People are seeing the benefits. They're embracing the LEED rating system," Topinka said.

One company to do so was German chemical company BASF, which two years ago constructed a LEED-certified house on East 29th Street in Paterson hailed as the "Near Zero Energy Home," a building that would use 80 percent less energy than a conventional home of the same size.

In the first year, said Jack Armstrong, the leader of Building Construction Markets, which built the 2,600-square-foot house, said it generated a heating and electric bill of about \$1,200.

"We came right in on target with that," said Armstrong.

Armstrong added that nearby homes half the size of the BASF house racked up monthly heating bills of \$300 to \$400 in the winter months, while the green house had a bill of \$120 a month. Today, Topinka said, the council is focusing on teaching tradesmen how to efficiently construct a green building.

"We're asking people to rethink total construction of a building," said Topinka. "It's not an easy change to make."

That's where Wayne Pfisterer, president of Pfister Energy in Paterson, comes in. Pfisterer specializes in creating renewable energy sources and green building components.

"We call ourselves a renewable energy company," said Pfisterer, 45. "We really specialize in anything that will either produce onsite power from natural causes ... or green technologies for energy efficiencies that can reduce costs."

Pfisterer's products include "daylighting," the use of diffused daylight to light building interiors. He also provides solar panels and green roofing that minimizes heating and air conditioning use.

The technologies have been embraced by builders across the country.

"We're having double-digit growth from year to year," said Pfisterer.

A handful of local institutions have already moved toward LEED buildings. Montclair State University already has two buildings registered with LEED. PNC Bank has 16 LEED-certified buildings in New Jersey. Even in Clifton, City Manager Al Greco said a builder was looking into constructing a green building on Main Avenue.

But for many companies without a green infrastructure in place, the prospect of laying the cornerstones of an energy-efficient building can seem like a too-costly venture.

Not so, says Little Falls resident Jeffrey Lewis.

"The thing with a LEED building is that it pays for itself in five to seven years," said Lewis, 31, who works as a project manager for [Inglese Architecture & Engineering] in East Rutherford. "If you're planning on living in your house for longer than that, it pays for itself."

Having worked on green buildings in Newark, Camden and Jersey City, Lewis sees LEED buildings as the future in architecture.

"I don't think we're going to have a choice pretty soon," said Lewis.

What LEED proponents will have to battle in the coming years is that constantly evolving technology forces a continual revision of criteria, which sometimes leads to unequal standards.

"LEED is a little convoluted right now," said Pfisterer, who pointed out that a \$20,000 green roof on a building and a bike rack in front of a building are both worth two points under the current LEED rating system.

The U.S. Green Building Council hopes to clear up some of the problems in the newest version of the rating system, LEED 3.0. The final draft of the version was approved at the beginning of July, and will go into effect in January 2009.

The new version of the rating system reallocates and reweighs points and becomes more flexible for accommodating the rating of new technology.

"LEED is dynamic," said Topinka, of the New Jersey chapter. "It changes because you can do things better."

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Caption:

PHOTO - Aldo Martinez / Special to the Herald News - This home on East 29th Street in Paterson embraces the LEED system and reportedly uses 80 percent less energy than a conventional house of the same size.

PHOTO - Kevin R. Wexler / Staff Photographer - Little Falls resident Jeffrey Lewis, project manager for Inglese Architecture & Engineering, says that a LEED-certified building will pay for itself in five to seven years.

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