

# Not all green buildings created equal

- Many cities are constructing environmentally safe structures, but they are not necessarily LEED-certified

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES  
Contra Costa Times

Article Launched: 05/31/2007 03:04:24 AM PDT

Green building should mean both the architect and builder can create a certified green project, but that's not always the case, building professionals say.

In Orinda, the new city hall will rank high on the environmental responsibility chart with a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified gold project. Its architect, Henry Siegel of Siegel & Strain, has almost 15 years of experience in green building.

"(Green building) has really become mainstream," he said. "Just in the last year or two it's exploded and expanded."

The LEED designation is a stamp of green approval by the U.S. Green Building Council, based in Washington, D.C., and the level of certification is based on the score of each project. The higher the score, the higher the level. The certification goes from the basic LEED certification, the lowest certification, up to its highest, LEED-certified platinum.

But the notion of green building is so vague that many building professionals want a designation or certification for green builders or architects.

Tom Holsman, chief executive officer of the Associated General Contractors of California, said that working LEED projects requires education and, more important, certification.

"How many builders have done (a LEED project) and how many can?" he asked. "The demand is going up, and the qualified people to do it is not going up."

Holsman said that because there is no standardized process to certify green builders or architects, they can say they are proficient whether it's true or not. Holsman also said that cities are to blame because they commission designs that may not be capable of achieving LEED status. "If we start out with an unclear definition, it gets worse," he said. "The final product will occasionally come out different from what you ordered."

Siegel said that although he and his company have 15 years of experience in LEED-certified designs, anyone can call themselves a green architect.

"Every architect now says they're a green architect," he said. "And any contractor involved in public works realizes they have to learn more about it and get people qualified to do the paperwork that LEED requires."

Although Orinda has no mandatory law for green public building, the City Council chose to build a progressively green project.

The new \$10 million city hall building is expected to be 94 percent more energy efficient than office buildings across the country and reduce carbon emissions by 55 percent, said Schauleh Vivian Sahba,

spokeswoman for Siegel & Strain Architects.

"We thought it would be a really good thing and have significant operating savings," said City Councilwoman Amy Worth. "And at this point, it's really encouraging people to use building standards that are environmentally sensitive."

The city, like other agencies, felt that it should set the example for the community.

"We have a lot of older buildings (in downtown Orinda), and if they turn over and are remodeled and developed ... I think it makes sense that they are as green as possible," said Victoria Smith, mayor pro tem.

The LEED Green Building Rating System is a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for developing high-performance sustainable buildings, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit group that comprises 70 local chapters, affiliates and groups. LEED conforms to and surpasses California's 2005 Building Energy Efficient Standards, or Title 24, which took effect Oct. 1, 2005.

LEED buildings use 20 percent to 50 percent less energy and cut carbon emission by as much as 40 percent more than conventional buildings, according to Taryn Holowka, spokeswoman for the U.S. Green Building Council.

But many cities are willing to trade the lengthy LEED certification process for a environmentally sensitive building.

The El Cerrito City Hall due to be built next year, although considered green by the city standards, will not be LEED-certified.

"I think we felt comfortable calling it an environmentally safe building or a green building," said Jerry Bradshaw, public works director and city engineer. Bradshaw said the building will use less heating and cooling and use recycled materials.

Lafayette's new library will follow the LEED guidelines and use solar power, but won't be a certified project.

City Manager Steven Falk said the City Council wanted its new library and learning center to save money and create a healthier environment for patrons.

"They have a responsibility to set an example for private development," he said. "The city can't really tell private developers to build green if they're not willing to do so itself."

C. Overaa & Co., a family-owned construction company based in Richmond, will be taking on the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, an estimated \$30 million project.

"When green building was first implemented, there was a premium being paid," said Carl Overaa, business development director. "Now it's par for the course."

The company is also working on Richmond's new City Hall, another possible LEED project. Overaa estimated that green building or LEED standards generally cost about 5 percent to 10 percent more than general building, but the money is eventually recouped. More money upfront may be unattractive to home buyers, he said, but not to the public sector, which can afford long-range goals.

Some critics of the new laws agreed.

"Cities are thinking exclusively of all the benefits of the green building and not looking at the costs," said Joseph Perkins, president and CEO of the Homebuilders Association of Northern California in San Ramon. "If you ask prospective home buyers if they support green building ... they overwhelmingly say yes, but if you ask if they would be willing to pay \$20,000 more for a home they say no way."

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## Green Projects

Orinda City Hall; El Cerrito City Hall, Richmond City Hall, Lafayette Library and Media Center, Walnut Creek Library, Solano County Courthouse and the Livermore-Pleasanton Fire Station No. 4.

The State of California, Alameda County, Albany, Berkeley, Dublin, Livermore, Oakland and Pleasanton all have regulations regarding green building of public buildings.