



The LEED Racket

By Jim Clarkson

It's a shame to see money wasted in the name of energy conservation. That's what happens when good ideas are mixed with politically correct nonsense and a needlessly expensive implementation and certification process. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design – LEED - is a program promoted by the U.S. Green Building Council that does just that. It is mainly governments and non-profits that follow the whole LEED package. Management improvement programs periodically sweep through corporate America making that sector susceptible to sound-good programs like Quality Circles, Six Sigma, and Lean Manufacturing now overlaid with LEED. Once a few big names get on board with the latest program it is followed lemming-like by other enterprises until the next management fad replaces it. Hopefully, the fashionable but wasteful LEED program will soon run its course before it gives sensible energy efficiency a bad reputation. If the public begins to see efficiency measures bundled with outrageous boondoggles, then the good is tarred along with the bad.

It is not just the totalitarian environmentalists that are now pushing to make the LEED standards mandatory; but a sizable segment of the architectural and design engineering community are enthusiastic promoters. That's because the certification and on-going compliance for LEED requires an enormous amount of design time and special expertise. There is growing vocal minority in the design business that is making stinging criticisms of the LEED program. Many budget-pressed enterprises are achieving LEED compliance without seeking the expensive certification.

LEED advocates say the added cost of building to their standards is small. That may be true for the actual recommended energy measures; it is the certification process that is so costly. Proponents of LEED say there are short paybacks and many benefits for the extra costs. But the environmental benefits are subjective. Claims that workers are happier in a new building may be true, but the same could be said for any new building. Plus, many of the projected savings for LEED buildings are proving very difficult to verify.

This is not to say LEED standards do not save energy. Many efficiency improvements are hard to measure. The real issue is the huge waste of money that is spent on things that do not save energy. LEED's grab bag of silly environmental measures and worthwhile energy features has competition with other standard-making groups.

The greatest benefits from energy standards will be achieved when competitive groups innovate to meet consumer demands. New technologies and building techniques will develop and gain acceptance. LEED with its one-size-fits-all standard, questionable benefits and high costs is resistant to change and relying increasingly on mandates for new customers.