

Is LEED® Worth It?

Author: Eric T. Truelove, PE, GGA, LEED AP BD+C, The Renschler Company

I'll never forget how excited I was when I returned from the first annual meeting of the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) in 1994. Everyone in attendance agreed that we needed greener, more environmental buildings for our economy, our health, and our long-term security. I couldn't wait until the first version of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) program was released and was lucky enough to commission one of the very first LEED Platinum buildings. Since then, I have been involved with over 50 LEED projects. Now I wonder: Is LEED dying under its own weight?

Years ago, many of my colleagues complained about the unnecessary complexity and cost of the LEED system. They started promising clients something on the order of delivering a building that would be certifiable to the LEED Silver level or would be designed with the LEED checklist in mind. I bristled at those claims. Certifiable meant nothing to me and was, in my opinion, a smoke screen to keep the owner from realizing they were simply getting a standard building without any real green features. However, now that I have struggled with the latest version of LEED, I have a better understanding of where my colleagues are coming from.

When you submit for LEED certification, reviewers who supposedly know something about design and construction take a look at your materials and then respond that they either agree you met LEED guidelines, or don't believe you can meet LEED guidelines, or need more clarification. On my last LEED submittal, I received 23 pages of comments for more clarification. Here is one of those comments quoted directly from the reviewer:

However, the narrative explaining the project-specific circumstances preventing the technically-qualified Commissioning Agent from being able to complete the required signatory and how compliance with the requirements of this prerequisite was verified has not been provided as required.

I am not even sure the sentence above is grammatically correct, never mind says anything meaningful. Keep in mind that I have to respond to 23 pages of these types of comments. Tell me this isn't a canned response spit out of a computer file which was written by an attorney, not a technical person.

Owners always want to know why LEED consultants charge so much and, to some extent, I have to agree with them. LEED certification should not cost six figures, particularly when that money would be better spent on actual green upgrades. But, what choice do we as green consultants have when we are working with a system as cumbersome, as bureaucratic, and as user-unfriendly as LEED? It doesn't have to be this way and I have complained to USGBC on numerous occasions only to be promised the next version of LEED would be better. So far, each version has gotten worse.

One trick that many clients have tried is to have one of their employees become a LEED Accredited Professional (LEED-AP), and then believe this employee is ready to wrestle with the LEED submittal process. I have had numerous clients ask me to reduce my fee based on their (clients') promise that I would only be in a supervisory or teaching role and that my client's LEED-AP would do all of the filing of the necessary paperwork. In every instance, the LEED-AP

has run for the hills as soon as they started to work on the USGBC web site and I even had one quit her job and leave for another just to avoid the process entirely. It doesn't have to be this way.

A good green consultant spends the majority of his or her time guiding the owner, the design, and the construction of the building, not fighting with a certification drama. We need more green buildings and a rating system that is developed around assisting users in the process, not hampering them. So, my message to USGBC is shape up or be replaced. I supported you for many years, but I am seeing USGBC drift off the path onto one that is self-serving and counterproductive. Green buildings are here to stay and as a consultant I know how to deliver them with or without USGBC.

You can contact the author at 608-332-8444 or etruelove@att.blackberry.net.