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Let the innovators lead

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Less than half a decade ago the term LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) was unknown to virtually everyone in the development industry and municipal government. Today even considering a major new development that does not include sustainable and LEED features is not only at risk of not receiving approvals; it also is simply out of touch with the market.

The role of LEED has served its purpose well. It is not only the brand of the U.S. Green Building Council, but more importantly, it is a confirmation that a project has met a rigorous test of sustainability standards. Basically, the USGBC has been the bridge for local planning and building officials in transforming building practices into sustainable projects. However, in very short order, LEED or LEED-like standards will simply become part of most cities' building codes.

The USGBC has played a great role, but LEED as a branded designation may not be sustainable when you take into consideration that we are in the middle of a technological renaissance. To put mandates in place right now may hamper innovation. To allow for an unfolding of technological innovation will ensure competitiveness, best practices and the lowering of costs of new technologies.

The Gerding Edlen proposal for a new San Diego civic center is a great example. One of former Mayor Dick Murphy's little-known contributions to the region was his 2003 mandate that all new city buildings be at least LEED silver certified. When CCDC released the RFQ for a new civic center, all respondents were willing to comply because now the net costs for such compliance are marginal and the city and market demand it. LEED silver is not a big deal and it can conform to existing codes

Gerding Edlen, our lone finalist (after Hines' withdrawal), went quite a few steps beyond LEED silver. They not only proposed the much more rigorous LEED platinum designation, but they proposed inclusion of concepts and technologies that push the envelope of code and design. The more tame aspects include prodigious use of solar panels. Then more and more exotic ideas, like wind turbines on the building (already a technology used in the Middle East) and green roofs - again, a technology that exists, but is far from commonplace. They also incorporated grey and black water use, which is a sustainable measure way beyond where most projects are willing to go. Grey water is the recycling of waste water for irrigation and non potable uses.

In San Diego this is already done -- our "purple pipe" system that can be seen in parts of the city. Although it is a technology ready to be put into place, funds to implement are very limited. Black water, however, is more extreme and refers to the recycling of raw sewage into grey water. All of these technologies are at the forefront of innovative design and engineering, and are all very relevant in our new market reality of high energy costs and water limitations.

The problem is, in light of the constantly emerging and changing cutting edge technology, how do we even begin to address these methods from a code and implementation standpoint? The high cost of energy and threat of water availability has forced the private sector to innovate solutions disallowed by code. When Westfield recently won approval for the expansion of UTC, one of its strong selling points was a zero increase in water usage. In large part, this was achieved by tapping into the city's reclaimed water "purple pipe" system. This company was pushing the edge of approved technologies. Gerding Edlen's civic center project is moving even more out on the innovative sustainability ledge.

In the spirit of San Diego as a world-renowned center for cutting edge high tech, bio tech and our emerging clean tech business segments, it makes sense to encourage the development sector to innovate -- rather than limit it -- within our existing code or even within the LEED standards. We do not need more regulation, but we may need more flexibility to allow private sector developers to lead the way to a sustainable building future.

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