

LEEDing the show

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WEST MICHIGAN — Leaders in the greater Grand Rapids area have long touted the region as a nationwide center of excellence for LEED-certified buildings.

Despite those grand claims, however, there hasn't been a way for interested people from within or outside the region to see those buildings up close and learn more about the tangible, real world benefits of the LEED certification process.

But that's about to change. The West Michigan Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, the issuing body of the LEED program, is partnering with local building owners, as well as students at local colleges, to not only showcase the region's green buildings, but also put some dollar figures behind the LEED program.

The need for a local green building showcase was even suggested by a national representative of the USGBC in town for a local chapter retreat.

"Because we have so many LEED buildings in this area, (the showcase) has been on our minds for a while, and we've been wanting to have case studies," Renae Hesselink, VP of sustainability at Nichols Inc. and chair of the board of directors of the USGBC West Michigan Chapter, told MiBiz.

While numerous case studies have highlighted the benefits of LEED buildings, none of them had been done locally.

"People would pay more attention (to LEED) if people in their own backyard have proven that LEED works better," she said.

Hesselink connected with local LEED building owners to gauge their interest in being a part of the showcase and in participating in the case study. Local colleges and universities with LEED projects immediately jumped on board, and she's obtained commitments from Spectrum Health, Steelcase, Grand Rapids Public Schools, Herman Miller, Bazzani Associates, the Grand Rapids Art Museum and Dwelling Place, among others.

The local chapter has also linked with students at the University of Michigan's MBA program to perform case studies and analyses of what the LEED certification means to those building owners. The aim, Hesselink said, is to come up with real dollar figures that building owners were able to save by following LEED protocols in the buildings. That information could be a powerful persuader for others in the area thinking of building a new building or renovating an existing structure.

Armed with the case study information, the West Michigan chapter plans to publish a book on the region's green buildings. The book wouldn't necessarily be limited to the buildings featured on the tour, either, but rather encompass LEED projects out of the city area and into Holland and Muskegon, for example.

One of the challenges in setting up the showcase thus far has been timing. Some building owners — like the public school system — will have to work around the tours. The solution might be to hold a two-day tour on a Friday or Saturday. The group is aiming to hold the event sometime in September or October.

Hesselink said while the chapter was initially thinking the tour would be marketed to a broad Midwest or national audience interested in or working with green buildings, the group is also considering opening the tour to the public.

For the inaugural showcase, she's hoping 200 to 300 professionals will attend.

And while the buildings certainly are the stars of the showcase, the chapter also expects the event could be used as an economic development tool.

“If we prove this is a healthy place to live and work and a good place to send kids to school, why would it not be an economic development tool?” Hesselink asked.

The planning for the showcase kicks off at a time of transition for the local chapter. In 2009, the national USGBC body changed the way it structured its professional accreditation and that impacted a key revenue stream for the local chapters across the country.

From the start of the USGBC program, local chapters like the one in West Michigan had been offering exam preparation classes to would-be LEED APs. Under the restructuring, the national body does not allow the local chapters to hold those courses, choosing instead to provide them through the national organization.

“There was pretty much an uproar across the country,” Hesselink said. “Most of us (at the local chapters) depended on that income.”

In part, revenue from those prep classes supported the hiring of an executive director, Linda Frey, who had been with the organization for the past two and half years. But with the main revenue stream cut off and with memberships down from peak numbers — the organization currently has about 300 members, down from 344 in the middle of 2009 — the local USGBC had to go back to being an all-volunteer organization. It currently has three paid interns from local colleges.

Several local foundations also contribute to the chapter's funding, and none of them have dropped off since the downturn in the economy, Hesselink said.

However, “new opportunities dried up” once the downturn really started to hit last year.

Going forward, Hesselink said the local chapter has several options for revenue, including offering study groups for LEED Associate certification as well as continuing education programs for LEED APs, all of whom need to get continuing credits to recertify. She said the chapter is also considering charging for courses to professionals in facilities management and other building-related fields.

“We want to have another director, and we hope within a year to have someone back at least part-time that would have strong fundraising skills, too,” she said. “We've always thought of ourselves as a trade association, and we're not. We're a nonprofit here to serve our members and in part to move this mission forward.”