

Certifying the Neighborhoods New Urbanism

LEED-ND could have far-reaching effects on the development industry.

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) is a joint venture of the United States Green Building Council (USGBC), the Urban Land Institute, the Congress for the New Urbanism, and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Its goal is similar to that of the traditional neighborhood development (TND) rating system and others, but is much more complex. It seeks to rate entire neighborhoods using LEED's already well-

initiative at NRDC; and Michael Pawlukiewicz, director of environmental and policy education at ULI and a member of ULI's Core Committee for LEED for Neighborhood Development—seeks to unite these sometimes disparate groups to create a system by which design and sustainability can be measured.

Farr believes there is nearly unanimous support for the concept of rating development at the urban edge, as well as infill projects. Such a system, he notes, would help developers create environmentally sensible new projects, and enable cities to define criteria when considering proposed developments.

Pawlukiewicz stresses the impact LEED-ND could have on future suburban development. "For the foreseeable future, the dominant share of growth will take place on the suburban fringe. LEED-ND sets the template for the new and smarter suburban development patterns in the 21st century."

The working LEED-ND framework is divided into natural and human systems, both inside and outside the neighborhood. The following is not an exhaustive list, but its core emphasis is on location efficiency; environmental preservation; compact, complete, and connected neighborhoods; and resource efficiency.

Natural Systems Outside the Neighborhood:

- imperiled species;
- wetland protection;
- farmland preservation; and
- habitat conservation.

Natural Systems Within the Neighborhood:

- stormwater management;
- heat island reduction;
- renewable energy systems; and
- graywater and efficient irrigation systems.

Human Systems Outside the Neighborhood:

- brownfield remediation;
- transit supportive location;
- infill and redevelopment; and
- connection to surrounding community.

Human Systems Within the Neighborhood:

- compact development;
- walkability;
- street-facing architecture; and
- mix of uses (including life-cycle housing).

Farr anticipates that under the LEED-ND system, a project could receive credits based on the plan and not

Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, Maryland, is an example of a prominent new urbanism project that originally received a very low LEED-ND score because, at its inception, it spurred adjacent sprawling development. Today, it is no longer at the urban edge, which has led to more recent "smart" development nearby, and has improved its LEED-ND rating.



established rating system for green buildings. Numerous new urbanism leaders recognize that LEED is an industry-established green building certification system. It is, in fact, an environmental rating system going mainstream and becoming a significant force in the building industry.

The main purpose of LEED-ND is to rate developments on the merits of neighborhood design, in addition to building design. Spearheading the LEED-ND process is Doug Farr, founding principal of Farr Associates in Chicago. Farr explains, "LEED-ND is not intended, per se, to certify new urbanism, but more to certify smart growth or sustainable development, of which new urbanism is a big contributor. The LEED-ND designation will be like an environmental stamp of approval for a project."

Currently, LEED only applies to individual buildings and property, not to the context in which they are built. When applied to the overall neighborhood context, the LEED-ND ranking system could play a very significant role. A committee—consisting of, among others, Farr; Victor Dover, partner in Dover, Kohl and Partners; Kaid Benfield, senior attorney and director of the smart growth

SAM NEWBERG is an associate with Minneapolis-based Dahlgren, Shardlow, and Uban, and is the founder of Joe Urban, Inc.

just on the finished product. Front-end prerequisites, such as connectivity and a transit-related smart location, would apply to any ND credits. Ultimately, Farr explains, the “smartest developments would not get the best rating unless they included a high percentage of green buildings; moreover, the green buildings would not rate the highest unless they were located in smart locations.”

Farr continues, “Indeed, one of the biggest issues has to do with where a project is located. New urbanists seem more willing to excuse a greenfield leapfrog project if it is designed well. Smart growth types do not embrace this at all, and in fact are troubled by the disconnect. It is difficult to reconcile the two in a single rating system,” he maintains. Agreeing with this is Charles Bohl, director of the Knight Program in Community Building at the University of Miami School of Architecture, and author of ULI’s book, *Place Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages*. “How can you create a rating system that can apply equally well to projects in Louisville and in Manhattan? The system will have to be carefully calibrated to different degrees of urbanity,” stresses Bohl.

Farr emphasizes that LEED-ND is about doing “enough of the right things.” He acknowledges the process will undoubtedly create “a hot white line” at the point where a town’s historic core, the walkable world, meets the sprawling edge, the auto-dependent world. “It will be an interesting political line at which point LEED-ND essentially will tell towns they are too auto dependent, they should be more walkable, and they cannot be approved.”

This is the conundrum: the possibility that a prominent new urbanism project could achieve a very low LEED-ND score. As part of the discussion process, the LEED-ND has been using several case studies of various developments—greenfield and infill—to discuss how specific aspects of development should be weighted in the certification process.

It is the very criticism of a new urbanism project that may ruffle the feathers of longtime new urbanists. Nonetheless, perhaps the point of all of this, according to Farr, is to get these issues out in the open and debate them. “That is the whole point with LEED right now; you can ignore several of the categories, and still have a green building,” he notes.

Indeed, the challenge of the LEED-ND process is to plug the principles of new urbanism into the somewhat rigid LEED system of prerequisites. The range of practitioners on the committee will bring a variety of values and

priorities to the table. Moreover, there is general agreement on the overall benefits of a holistic approach to green development.

Farr believes the great value of LEED-ND will be evident during entitlements. The creators of the LEED-ND certification process hope to derail NIMBYs during brownfield and greyfield redevelopments—particularly, when NIMBYs pose as environmentalists attacking the density of a project—by putting that “environmental stamp of approval” on the project, he explains.

The LEED-ND proposal for comprehensive development ranking is, indeed, thought provoking. The committee hopes to pilot the program early next year, but it recognizes that the process will be hotly debated along the way.

Certifying neighborhood development in some manner, be it through practitioners or the projects themselves, has significant merit and many proponents. The various certification methods appearing in the next few years should enable developers and public officials to better evaluate development proposals. ■