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Following the LEED

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When it comes to calling cards for developers, there's nothing like the prospect of a LEED designation to pique the interest of elected officials.

Consider for example the recent Westhills proposal in Langford, a staggering 5,000 units slated for 470 acres at the west side of Langford lake. It's to be built over the next 15 years.

Sure, there's a good chance development-friendly Langford council would have approved the project anyway, but developer Jim Hartshorne's recent pledge to create Canada's first entirely "green" neighbourhood certainly helped sell the project during a public meeting held in mid-April.

All buildings in the \$2-billion development will be built to LEED standards, Hartshorne said, with energy-efficient heating, low pollution lighting, low-flow toilets, grey water irrigation systems and pesticide-free landscaping. The project is also being billed as a catalyst for plans to turn the nearby E&N Railway into a commuter rail line.

According to Langford's chief engineer, Michael Baxter, those requirements will be built into the Westhills master agreement, should the proposal survive an upcoming public meeting.

"All that will be stipulated in the master agreement," he said.

Short for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, LEED designations come in bronze, silver, gold and even platinum, although achieving the latter standard is a tall order for the average developer. And not all "green" projects end up as green as they were originally intended.

During the design stage of Save- On-Foods Memorial Centre, developer RG Properties considered going after a LEED designation but backed off



Sharon Tiffin/Saanich News

Joe van Belleghem stands next to the plaque awarded to the Vancouver Island Tech Park in Saanich for the building design's commitment to LEED standards.

after determining the system isn't well-suited to recreational facilities. RG saved money by using crushed rock from the site excavation in the building's foundation, but that was the extent of the project's eco-friendly features.

The Capital Regional District's new headquarters in downtown Victoria is shooting for LEED "gold," the second highest rating available, but official certification is still months away. The new library branch planned for Tillicum, by Pearkes recreation centre, is slated to be LEED silver.

Two buildings under construction at the University of Victoria, including the school's new medical services building, are also being built to LEED specifications.

Both Dockside Green on Tye Road and The Parkside resort and spa on Humboldt Street, are hoping to become the first LEED platinum projects in Canada.

But to date, the only Greater Victoria project to achieve the LEED gold standard is Vancouver Island Technology Park on the former Glendale Hospital site in rural Saanich that opened four years ago.

Joe Van Belleghem, who worked as an environmental consultant on that project, blamed the lack of LEED projects since then on the prevailing attitudes of developers, as opposed to the extra cost of building to LEED specifications.

Van Belleghem, whose company, Windmill Construction, is also building Dockside Green, predicted that the project's LEED platinum designation shouldn't cost more than one or two per cent above normal cost.

"It all depends on who is building the project. The level of green building experience the team has will really influence (how much) you can build for," he said. "It just means you have to design a lot smarter. The tech park really opened people's eyes. We were able to recycle up to 99 per cent of the materials (from the old hospital) and we saved a lot of money on tipping fees."

The Tech Park project earned LEED points for, among other things, using recycled ash in its concrete, opting for energy-saving LCD computer monitors, installing waterless urinals, paving the parking lot with porous materials to reduce runoff and including showers and bicycle storage for all employees.

Many of those features will be included in the Dockside Green project, Van Belleghem said.

Also included will be energy efficient window glazing and extra insulation, which will reduce the project's heating load, thereby lowering the cost of its mechanical systems. Buyers will be offered free bicycles and discount bus passes. As well, the project includes an on-site sewage treatment system and energy-efficient appliances. The water-savings alone - about 70 million gallons a year - should cover the cost of sewage treatment.

"Some things might cost more up front, but when the savings in heat, water and electricity add up over the life of the building, it's well worth

it," Van Belleghem said.

The Dockside project with its vast tract of land, offers ample opportunity for green space and environmental design - features that earn LEED credits, Van Belleghem said.

The Parkside, on the other hand, will rise from a cavernous hole in the bedrock next to Humboldt Street, making it more expensive to score environmental points.

Andrew Pearson of Aviawest Resorts, developer of the Parkside, said his bid for LEED platinum will add about 15 per cent to the cost.

Although few residential projects have been LEED certified to date, Van Belleghem said the system's standards are being modified to encourage green housing. The gold-rated Battery Park development in New York City, completed in 2003, was North America's first LEED-certified residential project, he added.

"The knock was it wasn't really well-suited for residential buildings," he said. "But it's the way the green building movement is headed."

Even with the growing popularity of LEED standards for government, office and institutional buildings, many developers remain reluctant to spend more up front on green building techniques and recoup that over the long run.

"There's a real disconnect between capital and operating savings," he said. "I'm personally concerned when I see some of these government buildings going up. They're missing the long-term view."

Early on, only specialty developers like Van Belleghem were devotees of LEED projects.

But according to Victoria builder John Knappett, LEED standards have in many cases become standard practice across the industry.

"A lot of the costs of LEEDS are now the cost of every project," said Knappett, whose firm is handling the Ecole Brodeur project.

"Anything that's adding to the cost is not looked upon that favourably at the moment, but I don't think the costs are so exorbitant that it's a real problem."

Patti Faulconbridge, Knappett's administrative assistant and resident LEEDS expert, said eco-friendly building techniques can be as simple as recycling job-site garbage and taking precautions to keep contaminant out of the sewer system.

"At Ecole Brodeur, we built a holding pond to collect all the drainage and let the sediment settle before pumping it into the sewer system," said Faulconbridge.

"Basically we're not doing it any differently. We're just documenting where our refuse goes - 98 per cent of our job site garbage is recycled."

However Knappett said LEED costs rise exponentially with each level of certification.

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