

News from the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 2009

LEED-ND: New Urbanism 2.0?

*The publication of **Sustainable by Design: Insights from U.S. LEED-ND Pilot Projects** explores the efficacy of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) standard as an approach to encouraging sustainability in community and neighborhood development. Ajay Garde, in his analysis of the first US pilot projects, shows that the standard needs refinement, and should be part of a comprehensive approach to local planning if it is to result in truly sustainable neighborhoods.*

LEED-ND, a rating system used to evaluate and certify the level of environmental sustainability of neighborhood development projects, has been rapidly gaining in popularity and looks set to become embedded in municipal regulations. It requires meeting some planning and design criteria, leaving as optional other criteria that add points towards accreditation. The key question is how far the implementation of LEED-ND as a standard will go toward bringing about sustainable neighborhoods.

There are significant differences in the rating system criteria addressed by projects attempting only to become LEED-ND certified, or achieve one of the higher ratings - silver, gold or platinum. As the system is voluntary and market driven, developers are least likely to incorporate certification criteria that cost a lot and/or contribute fewer points towards certification.

The benefit of the LEED-ND approach is that developers can select what's appropriate and feasible for each project and capitalize on their strengths. This could also be considered its key disadvantage – for example, the system awards more points for neighborhood design than for green technology. This means that a significant number of projects may achieve certification without incorporating many of the standard's 'greenest' elements. Some of the earliest criticisms of the standard have been addressed in a proposed new draft, to be approved and released in Autumn 2009, which looks set to be stronger in terms of requiring energy- and water-efficiency. Yet problems remain.

The underlying issue is how to plan for *sustainability*, and the role that a system like LEED-ND should play in such planning. One of the most popular approaches to neighborhood design in recent years is New Urbanism, which promotes the development of mixed-use, higher density developments that adhere to specific design guidelines.

The latest version of the LEED-ND standard seems to be attempting to meld the New Urbanist credo with a concentration on green standards. The focus of LEED-ND remains predominantly on design and location, which is not the sum total of what makes a community or neighborhood sustainable over the longer term. The current system emphasizes the effects on the natural environment, but sustainability also has a social dimension. One example of this is that LEED-ND certified projects do not necessarily include any affordable housing, something many believe to be necessary for long term sustainable communities, as developers select other criteria which are easier to implement.

According to author Ajay Garde, the LEED-ND committee has taken "the technical credentials of LEED and the criteria of New Urbanism for neighborhood design and

created LEED-ND.” This approach may undermine the use of ‘green’ criteria, as developers may focus on New Urbanist criteria instead.

These drawbacks mean that LEED-ND is suitable as a supplement to, but not as a replacement for, local planning for sustainability that considers projects on a case by case basis within the local context.

Notes to Editors

- A pilot version of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) system for reviewing and rating neighborhoods was developed collaboratively in 2007 by three organizations: the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).
- A project must satisfy prerequisites in four categories and earn a minimum of 40 credit points for LEED-ND certification (USGBC, 2007a). Projects earning higher scores can be rewarded with LEED-ND silver, gold, or platinum certification, depending on the specific thresholds that they reach.
- The pilot version of the rating system evaluates projects on four dimensions: smart location and linkage; neighborhood pattern and design; green construction and technology; and innovation and design process (the fourth dimension has no mandatory prerequisites. A LEED-ND certified project is likely to be seen as a sustainable neighborhood.

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