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Rating system for green buildings threatened

Friday, 12 April 2013
By Heather Burgess



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Private businesses and consultants are urging the city to keep the world-renowned Leadership in Energy and Environment Design certification as part of its green-building policy.

LEED is a not-for-profit green building ratings system used in more than 100 countries to promote ecologically and fiscally responsible buildings. Since 2005, the city has required buildings over 5,400 square feet to receive the certification.

But the system was almost abandoned in January by the city's environment committee when Somerset Ward Coun. Diane Holmes successfully moved to get rid of the standard because of the backlog in the certification process.

She cited 14 recently constructed city buildings still waiting for certification, three since 2009.

She suggested instead of having third-party certification by the Canadian Green Building Council, the city could create its own system.

However, the committee decided to commission a report to look at the system already in place.

The report will be presented to the environment committee before summer break. Capital Ward Coun. David Chernushenko says he hopes the committee will not only reconfirm the program, but also raise the city's LEED standard from silver to gold.

The levels of certifications are certified silver, gold and platinum and are reached by earning a certain number of points related to materials selection, air quality, energy efficiency and more.

Fifty per cent of Canadian building projects are certified by this system and the numbers are increasing every year, says Mark Hutchinson, the director of green building programs for the Canadian Green Building Council.

He says even if the city did get rid of the current system businesses would continue to seek the certification.

While building green may cost around five per cent more in initial construction expenses, over the lifetime of a certified building the benefits may far exceed the initial investment.

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Businesses are moving toward LEED standards because environmental sustainability goes hand-in-hand with future economic growth, says James McNeil, vice-president of Cushman & Wakefield Ottawa, a real estate group.

Cushman & Wakefield has been studying the growth in Ottawa's green space, or the number of buildings that have received environmental certification.

The study found that at the beginning of 2009 there were 3.7 million square feet of green space, but that number almost tripled to 11 million by the beginning of 2012.

Christopher Simmonds, a Centretown-based architect, says he is seeing similar trends with his clients.

He helped design the Rideau Valley Conservation Centre, the first LEED gold standard certified building in eastern Ontario. Its energy and water consumption are 42 and 80 per cent less, respectively, than standard levels.

Chernushenko says he thinks LEED is the way forward.

However, with the certification backlog, the future certification might be limited to only certain buildings, while others will follow the already laid out procedures.

"The city should be taking a leadership approach," Simmonds says.

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