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# City of Ottawa backs away from LEED requirement for new buildings

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The City of Ottawa has backed away from a requirement that all new municipal buildings of a certain size be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified.

The city's environment committee took the decision Tuesday, with the councillors who form it arguing that buildings can be built to as high an environmental standard or better without the time and expense needed to become LEED certified.

Since 2005, the city has required new buildings that are 5,400 square feet or larger to be LEED certified, the green building rating system provided by the Canada Green Building Council (CaGBC).

"I'm aware of the pros and cons of LEED certification and want to make sure that the city's spending as much staff time and public money on actually building a green building as opposed to the paperwork to prove it," said David Churnushenko, a city councillor and member of the environment committee.

Churnushenko, who has a background in business

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consulting and said he is LEED accredited, said the direct cost of applying for LEED — about \$2,000 per building — is not significant for the city.

However, he said the extra time staff must spend on paperwork related to the certification process is a major factor. While details were not available on how much more time and money LEED certification is costing the city, Churnushenko said, based on his experience, an extra \$50,000 is typical of what it would cost to certify something such as an office building, community centre or low to medium-rise apartment building.

He added: “There’s a real backlog in terms of the actual certification process.”

### List of projects

A staff report to the environment committee showed eight city buildings had been completed and LEED certified in recent years, while 14 had been completed and are still awaiting certification. One of the projects awaiting certification was completed as far back as 2008, according to the report, while several others were done between 2009 and last year.

Thomas Mueller, CEO of the Canada Green Building Council, which provides LEED certification, disputed some of the information that Ottawa councillors were presented with.

“Out of those 14 projects, there were about five that haven’t even been submitted,” he said. “There are two that had been certified already out of those 14. There were two that had just been submitted over the last two months. So that leaves about four or five that are late, but not because of us.”

Mueller said improvements were implemented last year to make the certification process quicker.

On the value of LEED certification, Mueller said: “People say LEED is just a piece of paper or it’s just a plaque on the wall. Well, actually it isn’t. It is a detailed review of the strategies that we have applied to the building. . . . Typically, cities and (building) owners don’t have the time or the expertise to actually be doing this.”

James McNeil, vice-president of Cushman & Wakefield in Ottawa, has been leading efforts to create a green brand for the national capital’s commercial real estate sector and establish an eco-district downtown. He said the municipality’s move regarding LEED certification on its buildings is a step backward in relation to these goals

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and is out of step with trends in the private sector and Ottawa's biggest employer, the federal government.

"I don't believe that the city, and specifically the councillors, understand the importance of these types of initiatives for the overall economic gain of this city," he said.

McNeil says creating a green image for Ottawa would help lure multinational corporations that are increasingly concerned with having green facilities to work in for reason such as costs, staff productivity and public image.

"They're making it much more difficult for us," McNeil said of the city's decision on LEED certification on its own facilities.

He's also skeptical of the city's ability to judge its own standards on how green their buildings are.

"I'm not sure that the city has the capabilities to be able to deliver such a product that we would know for sure that they delivered in accordance to what they're saying," he said.

### **Private-sector impact**

Margaret Knowles, senior vice-president of development for Morguard Corp., which has a 21-storey office building being built in downtown Ottawa, said the city's decision will not influence her company's quest for LEED certification on this building or other projects.

She said the process of creating facilities that have low operational costs and are comfortable for employees, in order to appeal to prospective clients, automatically gets buildings to a level where they can meet LEED standards. However, she added that administrative costs can be as much as \$150,000 for certification, in her experience.

"But frankly, in a \$160-million project like 150 Elgin (St. in Ottawa), that's really not something that we wouldn't consider because we're going so far as to do this work anyway," she said. "Surely, you want the industry recognition with the certification to be able to dialogue properly with tenants and others that you've done all this work."

Knowles said, however, she understands why the city and others that use their own properties, rather than lease them, might opt out of certification because they don't need it as a tool to compete for tenants.

She added that private-sector developers have their own business reasons for seeking LEED and the City of

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Ottawa's move will have little influence on that.

### Is third party certification needed?

Diane Holmes, another city councillor who sits on the environment committee, said there's no reason why the city can't build things to as high an environmental standard without going through the LEED process.

"We build really good roads, but there's nobody certifying our roads," she said. "Nobody's certifying our recreation facilities and our water and sewer piping in the ground, but we certainly have very high professional standards that we use."

Holmes said city staff have actually been directed to aim for the equivalent of LEED Gold going forward, which is an upgrade from the previous target of Silver. She said city staff are familiar enough with LEED standards and processes to replicate the results without certification.

Holmes said it would be wrong to interpret the city's decision as a lack of commitment to creating environmentally friendly structures.

"The discussion at the committee was for improving our level of sustainability, and we have certainly lots of room for improvement," Holmes said.

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