

Is your building green? We'll all know soon

By Jonathan O'Connell, Sunday, April 17

The District imposed some of the nation's toughest standards for green construction in 2006, many of them to take effect in 2012.

But developers didn't need a deadline to get started.

Many are incorporating energy-saving designs into their projects, hoping to appeal to the federal government as it pushes new standards and holds out the promise of millions of square feet of leases. As a result, the District is now a national leader when it comes to the greening of its building stock. The city has the second-largest number of buildings rated under the federal government's Energy Star rating system, with 114. It is second nationally in square footage of green roofs, with around 800,000 square feet and another 500,000 planned for next spring. And the city has 179 LEED-certified buildings, as judged by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design system for rating buildings by their ability to conserve energy, water and building materials, second only to Chicago.

The trend is not confined to the District; according to data released by the Metropolitan Council of Governments last week, there are now 22.9 million square feet of LEED-certified space in the region, and nearly 80 projects were certified in 2009 alone, more than double the number in the previous year and triple that of 2007.

"Right now, the private industry is blowing the doors off the D.C. government," said Sean Cahill, vice president at Louis Dreyfus Property Group. Louis Dreyfus developed the first office building in the District to achieve the highest LEED status, Platinum, at 801 17th St. NW.

"You will not find a building going up in the city that is not LEED-certified," said Christophe Tulou, director of the D.C. Department of the Environment. Another 600 LEED D.C. buildings are in the pipeline, giving it a chance to catch Chicago.

"They have 239 square miles!" Tulou points out. "We're operating off of only 69 square miles."

Still, to this point, the rush to green the building stock has largely only affected companies engaged in major renovations or construction. That is about to change — soon it will affect the owner of every major office building in the city.

Posting the data

A lesser known provision of the District's 2006 law requires the city's Department of the Environment to begin collecting energy usage information from owners of about 500 of the city's largest commercial buildings.

The data are being compiled now, and by July 1 the agency will know the energy usage per square foot of every commercial building of at least 200,000 gross square feet. At some point – a date has not been set – the agency will begin posting energy usage data for private buildings online, giving tenants, brokers and competing owners an idea of how efficiently their buildings run. No other city has done this, Tulou said.

In coming years the city wants to do the same thing for smaller buildings: By 2014 it plans to have compiled energy data on all commercial properties of at least 50,000 square feet. “The thing that really distinguishes Washington is all that info gets on the Internet,” Tulou said.

Tulou’s agency has already rated the efficiency of its own buildings, including city government offices, police stations, fire stations, libraries, schools and recreation centers, and published the results in a report late last year. As will be done for private-sector buildings, the ratings allow the public to see the energy efficiency of government-owned buildings, which could allow green builders to leverage their investments.

For all the progress of privately owned buildings in the District, the energy efficiency of city’s own buildings turns out to be low. The report looked at 194 buildings in all and found that in general they “perform below average compared to similar buildings nationwide.” The city’s libraries and recreation centers, for instance, use about 2.5 times more energy than similar facilities nationwide. D.C. fire stations use 60 percent more energy than the national average.

When it comes to the city’s office buildings, there was no question as to which was least efficient — the 46,100-square-foot Grimke Building on Vermont Avenue NW, near U Street. A former school that is now home to the city’s Department of Corrections and Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, Grimke received an overall energy rating of 3 out of 100, with 50 being the national average.

A ratings agenda?

Despite his efforts developing sustainable buildings, Cahill doesn’t like the requirement that property owners submit to the energy ratings, largely because he considers the results inaccurate and partly because he considers them a likely precursor to a tax or fee on higher rates of energy usage.

“It’s the first stage of a tax,” he said. “Instead of force-feeding it to you, they’re just spoon-feeding it to you in small bites.”

He said the best way to achieve energy savings was for building owners to persuade their tenants to better manage their heating, cooling and lighting systems, something he says “saves more energy than the best mechanical and electrical equipment that I can put in the building.”

Private industry continues to push the envelope, and not only for Class A office buildings near the White House, as with Louis Dreyfus’s building on 17th Street.

Single homes aside, one of the only properties in the city to have its own renewable energy source installed on site is an affordable housing complex, the Wheeler Terrace Apartments, in the Washington Highlands neighborhood of Southeast Washington. The seven-building, 113-unit garden apartment community underwent a \$32 million renovation that included the installation of a geothermal heat pump.

“It basically provides a series of wells that in Wheeler’s case go about 400 feet underground,” said Mark James, development office for the nonprofit developer Community Preservation and Development Corp. The ground remains at 58 degrees at that level, James said, and the pump can extract from that temperature to cool the apartments in the summer or heat them in the winter.

“We’ve actually been able to reduce the overall energy consumption on the entire property by about 20 percent,” James said.