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Green and Greener

Law Imposes Strict Environmental Standards on New Buildings

by **Anna Scott**

On the greenery-filled patio between two sleek, energy-efficient South Park high-rises, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa last Tuesday signed into law a new initiative aimed at making development more eco-friendly.

The so-called Green Building Program, unanimously approved by the City Council and signed by the mayor on April 22, will require developers of large projects throughout the city to meet sustainability standards estimated to cut energy usage by 15%. The law is expected to affect about 150 projects each year, including the majority of new buildings Downtown, said Claire Bowin of the city Planning Department.

While including sustainable elements has become increasingly common among Downtown developers, the initiative aims to up the ante.

"I think it will encourage people to evolve even more," said Ninth District Councilwoman Jan Perry, "especially the smaller projects. They will have more incentive to build green."

Some in the local business community, however, say the law could hamper investment in an already difficult market. The city should allow more time before enforcing its Green Building Program, they believe.

"We support green building," said Veronica Perez-Becker, vice president of legislative affairs for the Central City Association. "However, these standards are very new. More time for implementation would be better."



Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa last week went to South Park to sign a law requiring developers to make large projects more environmentally friendly. Photo by Gary Leonard.

The Magic Numbers

The city's Green Building Program is based on the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system.

The 69-point system evaluates criteria such as water and energy consumption, landscaping, how much construction material is recycled and the air quality inside buildings. Scores translate into one of four LEED levels: Certified, Silver, Gold or Platinum.

All new structures built by the city are already required to meet LEED Certified standards.

The Green Building Program expands the requirement to privately developed projects.

As of Nov. 1 of this year, all new buildings 50,000 square feet or larger will have to document that the project is designed to LEED Certified standards in order to obtain building permits (residential buildings of that size with 50 or more units but less than six stories will come under the program May 1, 2009). The ordinance also applies to large-scale renovations.

The city previously expected to enact the program in July of this year, but extended the deadline partly in response to some community concerns, said Bowin. The new timeline, she added, will also allow the USGBC to formalize its LEED system for smaller buildings, currently in the pilot phase.

The city will audit one of every seven projects under the program, Bowin said, to ensure compliance. A Green Building Team comprised of numerous city officials will oversee the initiative.

Becoming the Norm

The concept of sustainable development has already gained traction in Downtown Los Angeles.

The South Group's Elleven and Luma high-rises on Hope Street, connected by the terrace where Villaraigosa signed the Green Building ordinance, are California's first condominium buildings to receive a LEED Gold rating. A third building from the developer, Evo, scheduled to open this summer, is designed to meet similar standards.

Other planned Downtown projects expected to meet LEED standards include Meruelo Maddux's 35-story condo tower 717 Ninth and the Related Cos. 230-unit San Pedro Apartments, both under construction and scheduled to open in 2009.

Some non-residential buildings have also gone green. The design of the Civic Center's Caltrans headquarters included numerous environmentally friendly efforts, and the Los Angeles Convention Center has taken steps to divert more than 50% of its waste away from landfills.

"Downtown is ahead of other parts of the city because we don't have the same NIMBY-ism, the resistance that exists in other parts of the city," said Perry.

Despite the progress, some say the Green Building Program does not go far enough. Richard Ludt, an administrator with demolition contractor Interior Removal Specialists, said that of the 11 million square feet of space his company demolished last year (including several buildings Downtown), only a fraction of the structures were larger than 50,000 square feet. "If we expect to make a significant change," Ludt told the council last Tuesday, "I firmly suggest we make that threshold 25,000 square feet."

Over the next six months, city staff will look into making the ordinance stricter. But "it's hard to say" whether that will happen, said Perry, "because of the economic situation we're in right now."

Regardless, basic LEED guidelines seem to be becoming the development industry standard.

"At our company, if you don't fill out a LEED scorecard and show that to the investment community along with your pro forma, you won't get approved," said Kevin Ratner, president of Forest City Residential West, whose Downtown projects include the Met Lofts in South Park. "People want to live in buildings that are more respectful of the environment, and they will seek that out. At the end of the day, it's the best practice."

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