



Behind the LEED® Curtain

Tools Track - LEED Documentation and Appeals Process
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The word “LEED” has entered the mainstream vocabulary of many AEC professionals across the country. Multiple projects tout LEED certification, and individuals throughout the design and building community are becoming LEED Accredited Professionals. While the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Rating System is fast becoming the recognized standard for sustainable buildings, the LEED certification process itself remains a mystery to many.

The USGBC hires consultants to help review certification submittals. Green Building Services in Portland, Ore., was selected as one of the five national LEED-NC Review Consultant teams.

For the past five years, Green Building Services has worked with owners and design teams to help their projects achieve LEED certification; but supporting the USGBC behind the scenes has been an informative experience. Here are a few recommendations that can make the process smoother and help project teams achieve their desired LEED goals.

GETTING STARTED

Begin by determining which LEED product best suits your project type. LEED for New Construction (LEED-NC) is the rating system for new construction and major renovation projects. It was intended to be used in creating high-performance commercial and institutional projects, with a focus on office buildings. It has however been used for K-12 schools, libraries, multi-unit residential, manufacturing facilities, retail, laboratories, healthcare, and many other building types.

In some cases, the new LEED for Commercial Interiors (LEED-CI) or LEED for Existing Buildings (LEED-EB) may be more appropriate if your project is a major tenant improvement or already in operation.

LEED-CI is tailored to address the specifics of tenant improvement projects in office, retail, and institutional buildings. LEED-EB has been developed as a set of performance standards for the sustainable operation of existing buildings. This rating system can be applied to existing buildings seeking LEED certification for the first time, or to projects already certified under LEED-NC or LEED-CI standards. LEED-EB criteria cover building operations and systems upgrades in existing buildings where the majority of interior or exterior surfaces remain unchanged.

The LEED rating system consists of prerequisites and specific sustainable criteria with point values attached to them. A project achieves certification, silver, gold or platinum rating based on the number of points earned. While it’s possible to obtain LEED-NC or LEED-CI certification with design or construction underway, the most successful applicants are those who register with the USGBC early on and pursue LEED from the onset of the project.

USING THE TOOLS

Registering a project establishes contact with the USGBC and provides access to essential information, software tools and communications that will be beneficial during the course of the submittal. Once a project is registered, utilize all the tools available– the Rating System, Reference Guide and Credit Interpretation Requests (CIRs).

Many applicants read only the Rating System and miss pertinent information in the Reference Guide. The Reference Guide helps to clarify the intent, requirements and submittals for each credit, and teams that read this guide generally have fewer questions and ultimately produce more accurate and complete submittals.

Each project team is allowed to submit questions, called Credit Interpretation Requests (CIRs), to determine how to apply LEED requirements to their specific projects. The USGBC provides the answers, known as rulings, to these questions online. Each project's first two CIRs are free of charge but additional questions incur a nominal fee. In many cases, submitted questions have already been addressed by the Reference Guides. The USGBC also makes previously logged CIRs on relevant prerequisites or credits available for online review to any registered project. Reviewing previous rulings may offer valuable insight for your project.

New Application Guides for specific types of projects (e.g. schools, healthcare, retail, laboratories and campuses) are currently in development and will provide further guidance for applicable projects.

IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES EARLY

Using the LEED criteria from the outset helps the team meet the standards as the design develops, rather than making design modifications later. For example, if the team discovers the project will fall short of a point without a certain number of bicycle parking spaces or showers on site, it may be more difficult to accommodate these items later in the design process. An early start enables you to identify the credits you want to achieve, evaluate their cost implications and incorporate the strategies into an integrated design process.

For LEED-CI projects, an early start is vital in ensuring that LEED criteria can be attained. The fast-track nature of tenant improvement projects necessitates evaluating and adopting sustainable strategies early on in the process. The selection of a tenant space itself needs to be carefully considered, to ensure that prerequisite requirements can be met. Conducting up-front research is important to make certain that appropriate materials or strategies can be implemented within the project schedule.

A commissioning plan and energy modeling report is typically part of the LEED required submittal, yet many teams do not plan for these documents at the start of the design. Apart from meeting the LEED requirements, the involvement of a commissioning agent at the beginning of the process will help the team ensure that the design intent and owner's operational needs for the project are met. As a team examines energy efficiency measures, energy modeling should be started early on to provide the greatest benefit. If the modeling is performed once the building design and system are already set, it is too late to inform the design and has little effect on improving the system's efficiency.

For LEED-EB, an initial audit of the building systems, operations and maintenance at the beginning of the process is a crucial starting point for LEED certification. Projects should carefully review the feasibility and impact of any changes that may be required, taking into consideration the potential benefits to the owner, building and occupants. LEED-EB projects need to analyze, audit and benchmark the building's current status, determine what certification level they want to pursue based upon cost effectiveness, and then implement policies or strategies to attain this. Once these have been adopted, the building performance must be monitored and tracked for one year.

DOCUMENT THE PROJECT

For LEED-NC and LEED-CI projects, the required submittal documentation as noted in the Rating System or the Reference Guide typically includes: drawings, relevant specifications sections or cut sheets, product data sheets, calculations, narratives, and an energy modeling report or a commissioning plan.

Documenting a LEED project can take a few months to several years, depending on the duration of the project. As LEED-NC certification is only given to completed projects, the LEED process can span several years from initial design to construction completion. In contrast, LEED-CI projects can happen rapidly as the design and construction periods are often only a few months long.

LEED-EB projects will typically take from one year to eighteen months to complete, due to the required monitoring period. The documentation for LEED-EB typically includes: photographs, drawings, relevant specifications sections, calculations, narratives, reports, policy or declaration letters, purchasing records, or company literature.

At the beginning of the project, establish a schedule and identify what every team member will be responsible for in terms of documentation. By delegating responsibilities, you share the work load and ensure that no one has to backtrack to locate specific details. Collect, collate and format the documents throughout the process rather than waiting until the end of the project. Also, appoint a guide or “green” champion for the team to keep the process in motion and track progress.

Submittal documentation should be legible and consistent. Simple as this may sound, many applicants neglect to follow these guidelines. Occasionally, reduced drawings are submitted that are impossible to read, and others reveal inconsistencies. For example, the quantity of purchased renewable energy for EA credit 6 (Green Power) should be consistent with the projected electrical usage for EA credit 1 (Optimized Energy Performance), but is often overlooked by projects seeking this credit. Another common mistake is a discrepancy between the numbers of building occupants listed in site- and water-related credits.

Submittal documentation should also be complete but concise. If you’ve designed your building to merit LEED certification, this should be evident in the documentation. Documentation should be presented in an organized format with pertinent information highlighted. Some submittals arrive with only partially finished documentation and others neglect to include the requested items. On the other hand, extraneous information rarely helps a submittal and excessive documentation takes more time to review. The Reference Guide offers appropriate levels of documentation.

CAPTURE EVERY POINT

Additional credits can be attained in the Innovation and Design category. Not all submitting teams remember that exceeding particular requirements by certain thresholds may count toward innovation credits. Another way to achieve an innovation credit is through comprehensive strategies for the whole building that provide significant environmental benefits, not addressed by the LEED Rating System. These strategies need to be carefully documented in the appropriate format for innovation credits.

Having an expert on your team with prior LEED submittal experience will help ensure the documentation satisfies the reviewer’s questions during the submission process. In addition, someone with extensive current knowledge of the rating system or prior experience with the certification process will have a better understanding of the credit intentions and how decisions are made on subjective interpretations. Those that have completed an application can also assess how to compile documentation better the next time.

THE SUBMISSION PROCESS

At this time, there are two versions of LEED-NC: 2.0 and 2.1. Any project currently registered can use either version when applying for certification, or opt for a mixed submittal using both 2.0 and 2.1. The certification process for all LEED products begins with the Preliminary Review of the submitted documents by the USGBC. This stage typically takes about a month.

Under LEED-NC v2.0, each credit and prerequisite is deemed “earned” “pending” or “denied,” based on the clarity and relevancy of the information submitted. To date, all projects submitted have had a percentage of their documentation as “pending” mostly due to incomplete, inconsistent or inaccurate information, or a misunderstanding of the prerequisite or credit’s intent and requirements.

Upon notification of their application's status after Preliminary Review, teams have four weeks to resubmit documentation on any pending points that require additional information or clarification. Final Review is usually a three-week period and then the applicant is notified on the final certification level and points achieved.

In the 2.1 version for LEED, credits and prerequisites are deemed "credit achievement anticipated" (CAA), "pending" or "denied". Several CAA credits in v2.1 submissions are randomly selected for audit. While v2.1 submissions generally ask for less documentation than v2.0, it's imperative to have the documentation ready if the reviewer needs to examine it to ensure compliance or if the credit is audited.

If two or more audited credits are denied during the Final Review, a Second LEED Review is required and further credits or prerequisites will be audited. The team will then repeat the resubmission process and Final Review.

By considering these suggestions as you prepare your submittals, your team will have a greater chance at certification success. The USGBC's goal is to help projects achieve certification and the system is designed to provide as much information and assistance as possible. At the same time, the organization is dedicated to certifying projects that have demonstrated a commitment to sustainability by meeting the highest performance standards. For more information, please visit the USGBC's website page at <https://www.usgbc.org/LEED/Project/certprocess.asp>.

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Green Building Services is a consulting services business that works closely with clients to identify and implement green building and facility management practices that efficiently meet their needs