SUSTAINABILITY

Build Green and Build Value
Sustainable building makes good business sense.

by Ray Lees, PSA-Dewberry

Can a business investment in sustainable, eco-friendly facilities co-exist with a prudent focus on the bottom line? For organizations large and small, the benefits of green design and construction are becoming clear. Not only do sustainable buildings offer healthy, pleasant working environments, they also provide financial savings by conserving resources and optimizing long-term life-cycle value.

The “green building” trend has been a topic of conversation for several years, but with more buildings now being delivered that meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) criteria and other stringent standards, the business community is starting to take note of the direct benefits. The U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), which oversees the LEED rating system for buildings and accreditation for professionals, offers access to a host of publications, case studies and research that underscore not only the environmental impact of sustainable facilities, but the potential for cost savings as well.

Performance and Payback
A March 2008 report prepared for USGBC, for example, states that LEED buildings are showing average energy use at a rate 25 to 30 percent lower than the national average. Entitled “Energy Performance of LEED for New Construction Buildings,” the report also points out that the savings are higher for LEED Gold and Platinum buildings, with those facilities approaching the industry-embarked Architecture 2030 interim goal calling for a 50 percent energy savings. (Architecture 2030 has set an overall goal, known as the “2030 Challenge,” that targets a 75 percent increase in occupant satisfaction. Buildings on this success, GSA has set goals for reducing metered energy use by 30 percent by the year 2015, and reducing water use by 16 percent. GSA also targets a 100 percent elimination of fossil-fuel-generated energy consumption by 2030, in keeping with the Architecture 2030 goal.

While federal, state and local governments have set impressive new standards for sustainable building, private developers and accreditation for professionals are stepping up as well. Peoria, industry giant Caterpillar has targeted green business practices for years, with a focus on sustainable development that includes participation in the U.S. Climate Action Partnership and the development of innovative technology to reduce emissions.

According to Handy Truitt, division manager for Caterpillar’s Global Facilities Services group, buildings are an important part of the company’s emphasis on sustainable business practices. “One strategic area of improvement for our enterprise is that all new buildings will essentially be designed according to LEED principles,” says Truitt. “We have about a dozen buildings currently under construction that all meet LEED standards.”

Benefiting Employees
Truitt, who notes that his entire facilities staff at Caterpillar will soon be LEED-accredited, says that there are both “hard” paybacks, such as the reduction in energy and water consumption, as well as “soft” paybacks in terms of employee retention and productivity. “Our Global Facilities Services group is part of the Human Services division at Caterpillar,” he says. “Buildings affect people, and buildings that are designed with more daylight and better indoor air quality have a positive impact on our employees.”

Truitt points out that the structure of the Human Services Division, which also includes the company’s Environmental Health and Safety group, has facilitated a more cohesive, action-oriented approach to green building design. “Our alignment with Environmental Health and Safety has helped strengthen our focus on sustainable facilities,” he says. “Our policy is now very clear. Some buildings provide more opportunities than others, and we have a strong focus on cost. But we’re now looking more closely at long-term life cycle value and long-term savings.”

Locally, Caterpillar anticipates that its headquarters will soon be upgraded to LEED Gold status, and the company has an ambitious goal of constructing its new downtown Visitor Center to reach LEED Platinum. Truitt points to the resources of the USGBC as a good place for business owners to explore research and case studies that document findings. “Green design and construction are based on good ideas that are worth considering for any business owner,” he says. “It’s the right thing to do, and the payback is there as well.”

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A Return on Investment
Many small business owners are taking the green initiative seriously as well. According to Brad Deal, CEO and president of Sticks & Stones, a Peoria-based custom framing company, “We want to green our buildings for a number of reasons. If we’re going to own a building to house our operations, and we can save over the long term by incorporating more efficient and sustainable building systems, then we need to look at that. We want to make good business and economic decisions.”

Deal, who is currently exploring options for a new headquarters location in downtown Peoria, selected PSA-Dewberry, a Peoria-based architectural and engineering firm that has adopted the 2030 Challenge, to assist his company with the new location. PSA-Dewberry’s experience renovating an old downtown warehouse to serve as its own company headquarters appealed to him. Deal in considering features such as geothermal heating and a rainwater collection system that could be linked to the plumbing system. He is also exploring the benefits of wind and solar power. “If there’s a return on investment and it’s good for the environment, then it’s a win-win situation,” he says.

“The size of the company is irrelevant,” Deal adds. “If you’re going to own the property, you need to put pencil to paper and look at the long-term savings. Leasing in a green building can also provide paybacks. I think as a business owner you can be both economically responsible and environmentally responsible.”