

"Federation Corner" column  
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## **Is Montgomery County LEED or FEED on green buildings?**

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In the early '70s, when gasoline and fuel oil prices first rose rapidly, we responded to this "energy crisis" by driving smaller cars and by replacing windows as one of several ways to better insulate our houses. A few of us installed expensive solar panels to produce electricity or to heat our water. In the '90s, energy-efficient light bulbs became widely available which, while expensive, were long lasting and saved on electricity costs.

Also in the '90s, various organizations began to take the piecemeal lessons learned in seeking energy efficiency and domestic energy independence and applied these principles far more comprehensively to the construction and operation of buildings. For example, shipping materials from local factories can save money on transportation costs. In 1996, the Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) began in Canada, later coming to the U.S. It has since been renamed the Green Globes System. In 1994, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) began in the U.S. USGBC developed the first LEED rating system between 1994 and '98. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a systematic way to quantify ways to make buildings more energy efficient and cleaner and healthier for workers and residents while also reducing the negative impact on the local environment and even the global climate.

The more points that are earned, the higher the rating. For new commercial buildings, there are a maximum of 69 points that can be earned. To be minimally LEED certified, a building must earn 26-32 points. To be LEED Silver, 33-38 points are needed; LEED Gold, 39-51; LEED Platinum, 52-69. Earning the first points--such as installing bike racks or using paint that has few volatile solvents--is straightforward, affordable, and easy to do. Earning the last points, such as providing innovative wastewater treatment or 20% of the energy through renewable sources in the building are complicated, expensive, and hard to do.

The LEED system was fully operational in 2000, with cities around the country immediately adopting the system. The Solaire, in Battery Park City in NYC, was begun in 2000 and became the first LEED Gold residential high rise in North America. There are about 20 LEED Platinum commercial buildings in the U.S. The first LEED Platinum government building in the U.S was certified in California in July, and the first LEED Platinum residence in the U.S. was also certified in California in August.

Since then, dozens of cities and counties have adopted LEED-based rating systems for commercial and other buildings, using combinations of mandatory requirements and incentives. Where has Montgomery County government been while approaches in how buildings are constructed and operated have been revolutionized in the last six years? It has focused on energy efficiency in government buildings. It has incorporated pieces of LEED requirements here and there in its regulations. MCPS hired its first green building coordinator several years ago, and the recent opening of two elementary schools that apparently meet LEED Silver without formal certification has created growing excitement at MCPS and the Board of Education, although MCPS bean counters continue to complain about additional construction costs before experiencing the reduced operating costs for the buildings.

County Councilmembers have introduced several bills that require buildings to reach a level that is BELOW the most minimum LEED certification and then offer generous incentives to get to LEED certification and maybe to LEED Silver. Contrast this to California's recent achievements noted above. Portland, Oregon, which leads the nation in a number of measures of innovation in government services, began its LEED

program in January 2001, after its Office of Sustainable Development had reviewed this then-new program for 2 years, when LEED was first released. At that early date, Portland's government buildings were expected to be LEED certified and voluntary compliance was encouraged of the private sector. By May 2005, Portland was ready to require all public buildings to reach LEED Gold and to offer incentives for private sector buildings that reached LEED Silver. Even so, Portland was playing catch up with Scottsdale, AZ and Vancouver, BC, which had already required government buildings to be LEED Gold. In April 2005, Washington state became the first state to formally require all state buildings to be LEED Silver.

Portland, Oregon and other western jurisdictions repeatedly put the L - Leadership - in LEED. At this very late date, more than 5 years after Portland embraced, worked with, and learned from LEED, Montgomery County is considering a standard that is lower than what Portland took on in 2001 when there were no other jurisdictions to learn from. The best that can be said about this timid Montgomery County approach is that we need a new system called FEED, where the F stands for Followership. In fact, we should ask the USGBC to create three categories for our innovative county to aspire to: FEED Lead, FEED Iron, and, the highest, FEED Nickel. That way, buildings that can't be certified under LEED can be certified under FEED. FEED Nickel would be close to LEED Silver, but is it perhaps the Montgomery County way to prefer being the highest in an inferior system than the lowest in a superior system? If Portland can get the USGBC to certify a Portland version of LEED, USGBC can surely be persuaded to allow our self-impressed county to create its customized FEED program.

Certain councilmembers have initially defended this approach, promising to raise the requirements as the county gets experience with the LEED program. Meanwhile, the Tower Companies has built and is building LEED Silver and LEED Gold towers in this county and Sidwell Friends expects to have its new middle school become the first LEED Platinum school building in the U.S. If these councilmembers are perhaps now thinking that their proposed program needs to be strengthened before it is approved, there is a long way to go before this county's FEED can become LEED. At a minimum, all county-built or county-funded buildings should be required to be LEED Gold, matching Prescott, Vancouver, and Portland. Then, it can earn an L by REQUIRING all private sector buildings to be LEED Silver, with green taping for such truly green buildings. Finally, demonstrate real leadership by requiring that at least one county-built or county-funded building per year be LEED Platinum. That should get the attention of current leaders in LEED as they recognize that they have a bold new colleague joining them.