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LEED and Green Globes

by Lawrence (Larry) Clark, QCxP, GGP, LEED AP+

Being a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professional (LEED AP) for six years and a certified Green Globes Professional (GGP) for a year, I have noted firsthand both the similarities and the differences between the LEED and Green Globes systems. Both systems serve to drive green/high-performance-building design, construction, and operation. Both LEED and Green Globes rely on an independent third-party verification process although, as we'll see, their approach is much different.

First, as one would expect, the primary focus of both systems is in the same basic areas. Both systems address factors such as the site characteristics, energy and water consumption, the use of resources/materials, and the indoor environmental quality (IEQ). LEED and Green Globes both offer different tracks for new construction and existing buildings. And they both acknowledge the unique requirements of healthcare facilities and offer specific rating systems for them. Although LEED is the better known of the two, they're both recognized and accepted by the General Services Administration (GSA) and other agencies of the Federal government, as well as many state and local jurisdictions.

Both rating systems have been recently updated. The newest version of LEED (v4) was rolled-out at Greenbuild 2013 and features increased thresholds in energy, water, waste and IEQ; a new Location and Transportation credit; and a requirement for environmental product declarations and material ingredient reporting. Green Globes released its new NC (New Construction) update earlier this year. It's based on the ANSI/GBI Standard 01-2010: "Green Building Assessment Protocol for Commercial Buildings," which meets the Guiding Principles mandated by Executive Order 13514. (See full news release at <http://bit.ly/1eZxcOY>.)

For those not familiar with the history of Green Globes, the first environmental certification system was created in the United Kingdom in 1990. Known as BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method), the Canadian version was adapted and launched in the U.S.

by the non-profit Green Building Initiative (GBI) in 2005, becoming the first green building organization accredited as a standards developer by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). LEED, the better known of the two systems, was also based in large part on BREEAM.

Although there are similarities between the programs, the methodology between the two is somewhat different. For example, both use online tools; however, Green Globes is interactive, while LEED requires data uploading and waiting for results. While both require a minimum number of points, LEED has mandatory prerequisites — that have no point value — while Green Globes does not. In fact, Green Globes allows non-applicable categories to be excluded from the total point count, so that buildings are not penalized for those categories that truly have no applicability, and the expensive "point chasing" sometimes associated with LEED projects becomes unnecessary.

Perhaps the most significant differences are the time and cost to complete a Green Globes certification, both of which can be substantially less than for LEED. The GBI estimates that its certification is typically completed in three-to-five months, at a cost of one-third to one-half of a comparable LEED certification. My own experience has shown that, for the existing building projects that we've directly compared, the cost — including our fee — for Green Globes Continual Improvement of Existing Buildings (CIEB) averaged approximately 40% of the comparable cost for LEED 2009 for Existing Buildings (EBOM). For New Construction, the difference — including the commissioning requirements for Green Globes and both Fundamental and Enhanced Commissioning for LEED — was even more significant.

Interestingly, "From the Field News & Notes" (HPAC Engineering, Feb. 2013, p.12), cited the Turner Construction Company's Green Building Market Barometer 2012, which found that the cost and time required were among the primary reasons for respondents not seeking LEED certification for their high performance buildings.


Possibly the most important advantage of Green Globes, based on my personal experience with LEED projects, is their



The City Hall in Chandler, AZ, is LEED certified.

on-site assessment process, where an independent assessor visits the site and meets with the owner and consultant to review the project. With LEED, the information is submitted and an anonymous review team, engaged by the Green Building Certification Institute (GBCI), reviews the submission and provides comments. This can result in a serious lack of consistency and quality in the reviews provided by different teams. For example, there was an EBOM project involving several nearly identical commercial office buildings on an urban campus. The first two buildings, both of which were apparently reviewed by the same team, sailed through the LEED certification process with relatively few issues to be resolved. The third building, however, was mired in negative comments that clearly showed a lack of understanding by the (obviously) different review team and resulted in the additional cost of appeals and a long delay in the schedule for the owner. Although the project was eventually certified, no one associated with the project was happy with the process. And having to provide allowances in the LEED consultants' fees for appeals and interpretations only serves to inflate the total cost to the owner without adding any value to the process. It may also give the owner the perception that the consultant is not as competent as he or she ought to be, and generally reflect poorly on everyone — but particularly the LEED consultant — involved in the project.

This is not to say that LEED doesn't have its advantages. LEED is the most recognized and most implemented green building program in the world. It has arguably been the single-most influential advocate for sustainability in the built environment. And LEED has convinced many corporate leaders that green building isn't just for "tree huggers", but is about social, environmental and economic benefits. It has also inspired tens of thousands of individuals — myself included — to share in that vision. Many large national and international enterprises have mandated LEED as the standard for their facilities and there is no question that a LEED-certified building has the potential, if operated properly, to outperform a non-certified building.

So let's agree that, like everything else in our industry, there is no "one size fits all" solution. Each project should be evaluated based on its own goals and objectives, and the most beneficial outcome to the owner should be the deciding factor in selecting which green label to pursue...which, by the way, may not be just limited to LEED and Green Globes. 

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