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Definitions and goal-setting keys to Green development

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Developing or managing a Green building brings about a host of new considerations that must be cleverly confronted in order to manage risks and expectations.

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With the growing hype associated with Green buildings, there is plenty of opportunity for people to misunderstand what it means for a building to be Green.

Green building is a fluid concept and is not defined by clear parameters. Green buildings are generally characterized by key attributes such as energy and water efficiency, lower environmental impacts, improved indoor air quality and superior use of natural lighting. While a general definition of the Green building concept offers some guidance as to what Green building entails, it does not provide a definitive answer as to the proper mix of attributes required to deliver a high-performing Green building.

The difficulty in defining Green building - that is, those specific sustainable attributes - creates the potential for misunderstandings among parties including the building owner, the developer and the end user. Surely the assumption among the general public is that a Green building consumes less energy, uses less water and has improved health effect of its users. Unfortunately, not all Green buildings perform the same. In fact, the same exact building design may work in one region and fail in another region with differing climate.

One of the greatest challenges is establishing definitions: defining the attributes that make your building "Green," defining the roles and responsibilities of the parties in the development process, and deciding whether to achieve a third-party certification, such

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as LEED certification. It is important for the owner and design professionals to openly communicate the development's sustainability goals, the owner's expectation upon project delivery and clearly understand the differences associated with integrated building design.

Often the most significant opportunities for increasing building efficiency come from building synergies created through the integrated design process. This approach differs from the traditional design/build process, as the design team examines the integration of all building components and systems and determines how they best work together to save energy and reduce environmental impact.

A goal-setting charrette is utilized to engage an interdisciplinary group of professionals - including the owner, architect, engineers, general contractor and construction manager - in a process to identify, evaluate and recommend strategies. This collaborative approach is used to create realistic and achievable designs and to clearly identify the project goals, which are then translated into the project and construction documents.

Once the project goals and parameters are established, the responsibilities of the parties must be defined. With the multitude of parties involved in delivering a successful development, it is imperative that each party is aware of their project obligations and responsibilities. Creating these clear definitions will help manage the expectations and the relationships of the contracting parties.

The keys to successful integrated project design are to set quantifiable goals, create a team structure that encourages communication, develop strategies to meet the goals, and evaluate progress toward those goals. It is not sufficient to simply define the goal as achieving LEED Silver certification; the goal would be to clearly define the Green attributes and the performance target.

For instance, if the project goals include the achievement of exceptional indoor air quality, certain product specifications may require minimum emission standards or the elimination of certain toxic chemicals, such as volatile organic compounds (VOC) and formaldehyde. If the project goal includes diverting 60% of construction and demolition debris from local landfills, a construction waste management plan must be implemented and followed to assure such goal is met.

Similarly, if the project goals include reducing water use for irrigation purposes by 75%, the landscaping specification may include a significant percentage of native and/or drought tolerant plant requirements. These clear goals will help define the services, and accompanying obligations, for which the multiple parties are contracting and will avoid disputes over misunderstood expectations.

It is imperative that the parties understand who is responsible for the various project components. In the integrated design process, multiple disciplines are involved in the design process and, oftentimes, multiple disciplines may share in the responsibility to deliver a system that performs to the owner's expectation.

So long as the responsibilities are clearly delineated, identifying which parties are responsible if the project fails to achieve certain project goals or achieve a third-party certification will be less onerous.

A developer who chooses to construct a high-performance building will be faced with a host of new considerations and legal ramifications that will require careful consideration and skillful contract drafting. Such a developer should work closely with the design team in order to clearly identify the project goals. In addition, developers should consult with their legal counsel in order to best understand the legal issues associated with developing, operating, maintaining, leasing, selling and marketing a Green project.

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