

## South County builder sees market for green buildings while continuing to teach about responsible construction practices

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If you want to LEED, you have to know how to follow the rules.

Great Barrington builder Brian Sutton long has been an advocate of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, the national standard for buildings designed for maximum energy efficiency and minimal environmental impact.

Sutton started Berkshire Green Builders a couple of years ago with an eye toward designing energy-efficient luxury residential homes and vacation homes. But gradually the Long Island, N.Y., transplant realized the greater demand was training and facilitating other architects, design engineers and contractors in the LEED process.

"I had gotten involved with the upstate New York chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, and then I got involved with contractor training," Sutton said. "I'm certified to do eight-hour seminars for contractors.

"I realized this is the area that's really moving. (LEED) is really something I'm passionate about and love."

So Sutton put together a team of engineers, construction professionals and LEED accredited professionals like himself to be a resource for others in the field.

LEED certification - which is available in new construction and renovation projects - is slowly gaining a foothold in the Berkshires. In 2007, the North Adams Public Library became the first public library in Massachusetts to be LEED certified. Williams College is seeking LEED certification for its Stetson-Sawyer Library project. The owners of the Topia Inn and Topia Arts Center in Adams are aiming for LEED certification for both ventures.

Nationally, the USGBC, which administers the 9-year-old program, sites more than 21,000 commercial or residential buildings as LEED registered (including buildings already certified and buildings seeking certification).

But as anyone who has ever looked at the LEED process knows, it is about more than energy efficient lighting (though that is part of it). It also is about reduced water consumption, recycled content, indoor air quality and myriad other considerations that any one architectural or design firm may not be fluent in.

That is where LEEDlinc comes in.

"On some projects, the design team is very up-to-date with LEED and knows its role and what is required of it," Sutton said. "But if not, then LEEDlinc is able to provide a civil engineer or a lighting designer who can do the work according to the LEED standard."

"Not all design professionals are familiar with LEED. Everyone is outsourcing today, whether it is for (information technology) or structural engineers. This is one more thing they can outsource."

As you might expect, the LEED criteria are always changing as new technologies are developed and new targets for efficiency are established. Sutton's LEEDlinc can help designers stay abreast of those changes.

"We are up-to-date, and the smaller offices can't afford that," he said. "They can't afford to have someone on staff attend all the workshops and buy all the references."

Sutton admits that he was surprised at the lack of a market for "green" building in the luxury home market in the Berkshires.

It is not a matter of price, he said. LEED certification may cost a few thousand dollars (mostly for documentation and the services of independent accreditors), but that cost is negligible in the big picture when spending several hundred thousand dollars on a home.

"There doesn't have to be any more material costs," with a LEED building, Sutton said. "What you would end up doing is spending more money than code demands on your HVAC (heating, ventilation and air-conditioning) system. The code is lax around here, and you don't have to put in anything too efficient."

"The idea with LEED, of course, is to reduce the amount of energy consumed."

While the second-home market may be cool to the idea, Sutton has seen demand among local, full-time Berkshire residents.

"Perhaps it is an environmental stewardship statement," he said.

While there may be some upfront cost to seeking LEED certification, there are financial benefits as well - even beyond the obvious savings in energy costs.

"There is a shift in the marketplace in that the banks are starting to appreciate green building and are offering reduced mortgage rates," Sutton said. "Insurance companies are offering lower premiums. In some parts of the country, you can get permits faster."

In the town of Lenox, a commitment to green building can mean more green in the pockets of the customer.

Lenox reduces building permit fees for projects that voluntarily commit to using energy efficient design and materials. According to Lenox Town Manager Gregory Federspiel, the savings can be up to \$1,500, depending on the size of the project.

"We do it to encourage people to take the extra steps that are required to build greener - to save money for themselves down the road and help the environment in Lenox down the road," Federspiel said.

Federspiel said the discount program has been in place for about a year, and he has seen interest among prospective builders - even though the last 12 months have been relatively slow for construction startups.

Lenox has a two-tier approach for green projects. Level one is Energy Star, the joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy. Level two is for more advanced certification programs like LEED or NAHBGreen, the National Association of Home Builders' program.

LEEDlinc is not the first group to offer LEED consulting work, but it is unique in its approach of pooling experts from different fields, Sutton said.

"For example, mechanical engineering firms often take on LEED certification services, but we feel that may be a disservice to do it through one industry," Sutton said. "While energy is a big part of it, that team may not be as aware of the material options that are out there.

"By having a group approach with specialists in each of the five categories of LEED (sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality), we can help handle the entire process."

Likewise, Sutton knows there are a lot of contractors out there promising green building services. And he knows many are doing it with the best of intentions. But he believes that only the LEED certification process allows building owners to look at their projects holistically.

"If you're putting in solar panels, great," Sutton said. "It all adds to the cause. But it can be misleading to the consumer when you don't really know the bottom line.

"If you're putting in elements of green building, that's OK, but I don't think they should call it green building as such. If you're not looking at the whole site - if you're not saving water and energy and putting in environmentally friendly products - it's not truly green."