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Business View

Green (and better) building

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by [Stephanie Pollack](#)

Boston has become the first major U.S. city to incorporate "green building" requirements into its zoning code for large development projects. In addition to leveraging construction of environmentally friendly buildings, this decision should catalyze sustainable development across the commonwealth and the country.

The Jan. 10 vote by the Boston Zoning Commission implements a unanimous recommendation made by Mayor Thomas Menino's Green Building Task Force in November 2004. This two-year transitional period has allowed Boston Redevelopment Authority and City Hall staff, the real estate community and consultants to get up to speed. And experience gained in Boston and around the country during this time provides invaluable lessons for developers.

The first lesson is that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. The zoning requirements accordingly do not require a uniform set of measures: Developers select from a menu of options for reducing energy and water use and incorporating recycled materials. Applicants need only qualify for 26 green building "points" out of nearly 70 available. While most of the points are defined by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system, the city is not requiring developers to use the sometimes costly and complicated LEED certification process.

This flexibility means the green building requirements will not unnecessarily increase the cost of building in Boston. Some developers fear green building will cost much more, but this need not be the case. Studies found that the basic LEED requirements can be met at a construction cost premium of less than 1 percent. And modestly higher initial costs often are offset by lower operating costs.

Another key lesson is that greening should not be focused exclusively within the walls of the building. The new rules award points for recharging groundwater and reducing traffic congestion. Indeed, some of the greatest environmental, financial and community benefits can come from embracing transportation alternatives, such as bicycles, transit and car sharing.

Perhaps the real key to "greening" any project is to begin early in the planning and design process. Measures that are simple and relatively inexpensive when incorporated in early designs become problematic or even impossible later. The new requirements ensure early and careful consideration of greening, since Project Notification Forms must include a complete list of measures the developer plans to use.

Boston has worked hard to make its new green building requirements user-friendly, flexible, cost-effective and beneficial.

The city's real estate community should embrace Mayor Menino's conclusion that "green buildings are good for the environment, public health and the bottom line."

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