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Seattle No. 1 for green buildings

By [JOHN C. RYAN](#), Daily Journal of Commerce
Journal Staff Reporter

Seattle has more green buildings and more green-building experts than any other city in the nation, according to a new report from the city's Sustainable Building Program.

More than 800 Seattle professionals have been accredited under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

As of September, the city had 58 LEED-certified and LEED-registered projects, narrowly beating Portland, the former leader, which had 56 projects. Chicago came in third with 44 projects.

The Pacific Northwest is home to 12 percent of all LEED-registered projects in the United States, despite having only 3 percent of the nation's population.

Seattle was the first U.S. city to formally adopt a sustainable building policy in 2000.

"There are many, many jurisdictions that have basically copied our effort or gone beyond it," said Lucia Athens, chair of city of Seattle's green building team. Those cities include Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Portland and San Francisco.

"Now because of our work with the construction community, Seattle has become one of the strongest markets in the country for green buildings and expertise," Mayor Greg Nickels said in a statement.

LEED projects in the city cover almost 8 million square feet; about \$1.8 billion has been invested in green buildings, according to the city.

Architects were reluctant to comment publicly on the city's green building program and risk offending one of their key clients.

"The city does have a really strong green building program, and some people in the city push it really hard," said one architect who asked not to be identified. "Some in the city aren't on board; the mayor's office has been going back and forth on it, but seems to be getting back on track now."

Among other initiatives, Nickels' office will be proposing new impact fees on development to fund open space and linking LEED-certification to allowing taller buildings downtown.

"If you do want that additional height, you will have to be LEED-certified for both residential and commercial," said Alan Justad of the Department of Planning and Development.

Architect Allison Capen of the design firm Boxwood said Seattle's track record with green projects was essential to the state's passage earlier this year of the nation's first law requiring a majority of state-funded projects to pass LEED-silver certification.

Despite the surge in green building in Seattle and across the nation, the vast majority of construction still employs less-than-green materials and designs. The U.S. Green Building Council has estimated that 5 percent of new commercial construction nationwide is LEED-registered.

Jayson Antonoff of International Sustainable Solutions said LEED has been a powerful educational tool but meeting the standards does not guarantee that a building will be truly green.

"You can be LEED-certified and still not necessarily be an energy-efficient building," he said. The bigger problem is that many builders and designers still don't incorporate LEED considerations or other green techniques.

"There's still an awful lot of buildings you can walk into, like the condo's going up all over town, where you ask if they're LEED-certified, and you'll get blank stares," said Antonoff.

John Ryan can be reached by [email](#) or by phone at (206) 622-8272.