

Seattle leads 'green' wave in building

New state law paves way for environmentally friendly construction

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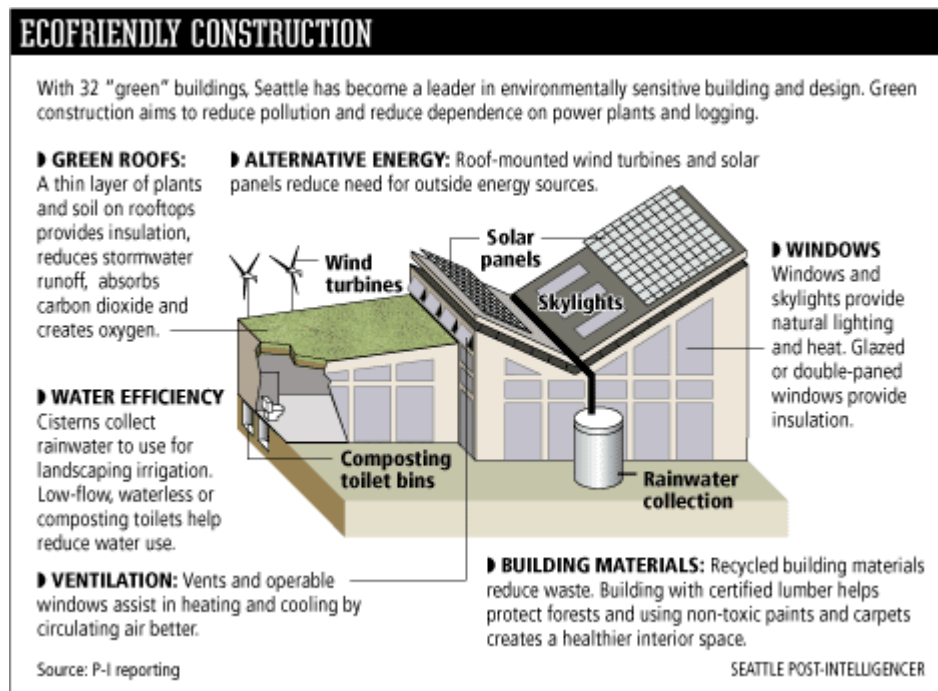
Thirty-two buildings in Seattle have a secret identity: They've been placed among us to help save the planet.

They're the first ripples of a wave of "green" construction that's about to wash across Washington, driven by a new state law and a growing appetite for ecofriendly design.

For years, Seattle has been a leader in a growing international movement to create environmentally sensitive buildings, but it's been little more than an experiment -- until now.

Washington has become the first state in the nation to require new prisons, offices, schools, colleges and other publicly funded buildings to meet a national environmental standard.

The law, signed this month by Gov. Christine Gregoire, is expected to affect billions of dollars' worth of construction projects over the next few years.



Lawmakers are convinced that the higher upfront costs of going green will pencil out in the long run -- thanks to cheaper utility and maintenance bills.

Green buildings also are supposed to be healthier inside -- using non-toxic paints and glues and relying more on natural light and ventilation. Proponents cite research indicating that the cleaner air boosts children's test scores and reduces the number of employee sick days.

During today's Earth Day celebrations, environmentalists are pointing to an even higher purpose. While green buildings may not look all that different from the sidewalk, they protect the environment in invisible, sometimes subtle, ways -- reducing demand on hydropower, reducing construction waste and soaking up storm water that can flush pollution into our waters.

The biggest drawback continues to be money.

It costs more to put in a cultivated, living roof than an asphalt one. Recycled construction materials are sometimes pricier and harder to find. It's easier and cheaper to let water run off a property than to capture it and put it to use. Installing high-tech solar panels and thermal windows, and designing rooms to bring in more sunlight, is often more expensive than simply turning up the thermostat.

Despite the higher upfront costs, the green construction law still drew strong support in Olympia, passing 78-18.

"We didn't call this a green-building bill. We called them 'high performance' buildings so people didn't think they're just hippie beads-and-incense buildings," said Rep. Hans Dunshee, D-Snohomish, a prime sponsor of the measure.

The law, which takes effect this summer, affects all publicly funded buildings over 5,000 square feet. Requirements for K-12 schools will be phased in.

To pass muster, public buildings will have to meet standards set under a program known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED. Ratings start at a basic level of "certified," then rise to "silver" (what Washington adopted), "gold" and "platinum."

The system, operated by the non-profit U.S. Green Building Council, doles out points for energy and water efficiency, indoor air quality and use of recycled materials.

No buildings in this state have earned the highest certification, although Seattle's Cascade neighborhood has hopes of becoming the first -- with a planned community center renovation bristling with ecofriendly features.

"Everybody gets behind the concept and idea of making buildings more environmentally friendly. The big issue is usually cost," said Theresa Koppang, program manager for King County's solid waste division.

In February, the County Council unanimously adopted an ordinance that

requires future county projects to seek the highest LEED certification possible.

Earning a "gold" rating for the King Street Center, the home for county government, didn't cost more when it was built five years ago in the International District, Koppang said. One of the features is a water reclamation system that collects storm runoff and uses it to flush toilets.

Public schools are a relative newcomer to green construction -- but a potentially huge player. The state partners with local districts to build 1.5 million square feet of school space every year on average.

In January, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction issued a report assessing pilot projects in five school districts around the state, as well as national research.

Among the green-building findings: a 5 percent increase in student test scores; a 5 percent reduction in teacher turnover; and a 15 percent drop in absenteeism. The report also cited a 25 percent reduction in energy use.

"It's just the beginning," said Bill Panos of OSPI. "We'll see this evolve over time." Solar power and other green concepts and strategies were pioneered in the 1970s, when oil prices soared. But in most places, the innovations were seen as merely bridging an energy crisis.

Encouraged by the current trend, Seattle developer Gregory Broderick Smith believes it's going to take a while for the private sector to embrace green construction.

"Corporate America is so focused on immediate profitability -- Wall Street is not thinking long term," Smith said. "I'd like to demonstrate that being environmentally focused can be profitable." Smith is aiming for a "gold" rating on his latest project -- the Reedo Building in Pioneer Square. The office building will feature a green roof, solar panels and operable windows. Exposed timbers will be milled on site. He's even considering installing a small rooftop wind turbine.

Seattle, San Francisco, Portland, Pittsburgh and Boston are among the cities that have adopted strong green-building programs.

In February, Seattle celebrated the fifth anniversary of its landmark policy requiring a LEED silver rating on city-funded buildings. But City Councilman Peter Steinbrueck, an architect, wants to do more -- offering developers and builders more incentives to go green.

A high-performing building with a green roof, for example, should get a reduction in its utilities fee for controlling the spread of polluted storm water, he said.

A major breakthrough was one of the nation's first green affordable housing projects -- Traugott Terrace, which opened last June in Seattle, built and operated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese.

The environmentally sensitive design tacked on several hundred thousand dollars to the \$6 million project, including a low-energy elevator system, but the church expects to reap savings from reduced operating costs.

Another low-income housing project, the \$10.7 million Denny Park Apartments being built at South Lake Union, is also going green, thanks to financial backing from the national Green Communities Initiative as well as Home Depot Foundation.

Around the state, Spokane has built a LEED-certified convention center, and the cities of Shoreline and Redmond are building green city halls. In the Seattle area, demand for LEED certification is on the rise.

Today, 29 city-owned projects are all aiming for some level of green certification. They include Seattle's City Hall and Justice Center -- the only two buildings in the city with green roofs.

Statewide, 90 green public and private projects are in the works. Sixteen have already received LEED certification.

Employers are increasingly putting a premium on healthy work environments -- a demand that developers are recognizing.

The next frontier is residential development -- single-family homes boasting green roofs, rain barrels and more.

"It's just starting," said Smith, the developer. "I hope every city wakes up to this. Sustainable design isn't just about buildings, it's about place and community."

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