



Updated Every Thursday Evening

March 13, 2008 EDITION

NEWS

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ENTERTAINMENT

CALENDARS

MARKETPLACE

VISITOR GUIDES

ABOUT US

CLASSIFIEDS

TEXT SIZE: PRINT

Unraveling LEED

Special certification plays part in High Country building

By Caroline Monday

"LEED certification" is a term that has been on many lips around the county.

The new Watauga High School will be LEED certified and Appalachian State University's Board of Trustees has recently charged the school to strive to build environmentally friendly facilities using LEED guidelines, if not actually pursuing certification.

This sudden rise in popularity begs the question, "What does LEED certification really mean?"

LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is a green building rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). The USGBC created the system in the mid-'90s to provide a list of standards for environmentally sustainable construction. LEED is meant to define and standardize "green building."

Another goal of the program was to develop a way to recognize environmental leadership in the building industry and raise consumer awareness. The certification offers programs for new, as well as existing, buildings and differentiates between commercial, residential and school buildings. A program for neighborhood development is in the pilot stage.

This recognition system includes a series of levels: certified, silver, gold and platinum. What level a building receives is determined by a point system based on tests and audits from independent third-parties.

Jeff Tiller, a LEED accredited professional helping with the WHS project and a professor in ASU's technology department, said these tests are wide in range, including everything from energy audits to surveys of the building's inhabitants on temperature comfort.

Tiller and the technology department have partnered with Watauga County Schools and county government to make LEED certification an attainable goal. Tiller said green building has been a priority for the new building since the early planning stages, but it was only later that the planners decided to pursue LEED.

Their partnership with ASU will make the certification more affordable as the different groups share resources. Tiller said he hopes to form and train a student energy team composed of graduate students, which to help with the audits. He said it would be a valuable learning experience for the students that would come at minimal cost to the school system and the county.

That initial price tag can be a hard sell for groups considering pursuing LEED, Tiller said, but the long term gains more than make up for that cost. The buildings are more energy efficient and save on resources.

Planners for the WHS facility are working to achieve a silver level of certification, and the building is slated to open in the fall of 2010. Plans include the installation of features that are both energy friendly and which make for a more student and teacher friendly learning environment. Plans include the installation of geothermal heat pumps and a recycled water system, which collects rain water to be used when potable water is not needed, such as in toilets.

Tiller pointed out that LEED is not just for increasing energy efficiency, but for also increasing the comfort of the building's occupants. The school will make use of day-lighting techniques, which have been shown to improve test scores in students and bolster attendance rates. LEED looks at factors, such as if the occupants of particular room are able to see the outside, which has been proven in studies to be beneficial.

Tiller said he hopes LEED certification will become present on the ASU campus and that, once it is established, the student energy team will serve as a resource for working toward that goal.



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