

## Turning Green into Gold

# What America's Heartland Thinks About Green

by B. Alan Whitson, RPA



I travel a lot. The downside is being away from home, getting up at 5:00 am, and a dysfunctional airline industry. The upside is I get to meet new people, see new projects and products, and spread the word about sustainability. A swing through America's heartland last week revealed the progress and key hurdles in the move towards sustainability. Forget formal market research. I got the type of pulse you can only get by climbing into the trenches with those who actually do the work.

In Columbus, Ohio I met the architect of the first building to be built in Ohio to the requirements of the LEED rating system. Ohio state law requires the "Design, Bid and Build" process for all public projects. To meet the objective of having the project become LEED certified, the general contractor is required to have a LEED accredited professional on staff. As the architect explained this requirement to the contractors in room it was very clear that this community knew that this was the first of many green buildings to be built in Ohio. However, I was struck by the frustration of one contractor. As this contractor detailed her telephone conversations with the USGBC in Washington, DC seeking information on how to become a LEED accredited professional it began to sound like the Abbott and Costello routine of "Who's on First." During this discussion I noticed two reactions in the room. The first was the sense of agreement and common experience by the other contractors in the room. The second was the almost instantaneous offers of assistance.

During a dinner with two product manufacturers the topic of the Frankenstein EIQ forms came up (see officeInsight 1.17.05). The brand manager from one of the manufacturers asked if anyone really reads these forms after they are filled out. She explained that in her industry the typical response to about 70% of the questions was N/A. Soon the conversation turned to testing protocols and certifications. It was clear that the use of proprietary testing protocols and certifications has created more problems than it has solved. First, since many of the "green" protocols are

proprietary, the fees quoted for testing and certification are "highway robbery" when compared to those for standardize test that can be performed by any number of qualified labs across the nation. The second issue was the standards and levels for emissions. While everybody agreed there was a clear need for standards and maximum levels for emissions, it appears we may need to add back some common sense to the equation. For example, one manufacturer joked, "the current levels for formaldehyde emissions in classrooms are often exceeded by several times by the off gassing from the apples in the kid's lunches and stay-press fabric used in the their uniforms."

After 24 hours in Indianapolis, it's clear to me that greening America's heartland is going to be all about money and common sense. In a place where the temperature is above 90-degrees and the humidity is plus 80%, natural ventilation isn't going to sell. The architects, builders and facility managers I talked with weren't interested in hugging trees. However, they really warmed up to the idea of high performance buildings. They like the idea of saving energy, and building better buildings, especially if they don't cost any more to build. No **Frank Gehry** buildings in this town – this is the home of the Indy 500 where the winner drinks milk not champagne.

It's 11:30 pm and I'm walking from the recently constructed Terminal A to baggage claim in the deserted Minneapolis airport and it hits me – dimming ballasts and night time setback. At this time of night, why is every square inch of this sprawling airport illuminated to 70-some foot-candles? It seems the same level of thinking that goes into running the major airlines is used at the airports too.

A day later, it is evident by the group of architects, designers, engineers, contractors, facility professionals and product manufacturers assembled that sustainability is at the top of everyone lists. During the morning, it was plain that the issue for many is how to get the numbers to pencil out. An architect

with a national firm commented that clients are now asking for green projects, however, those clients are unwilling to spend more to do so.

It's clear that sustainability has moved beyond the stage of convincing people to do sustainable design and buy green products. We have reached the stage of how to make the numbers work and execution. Yes, there are still those that need to be convinced. But if we don't move forward with helping those that are ready for the next level, we'll never get to the next level.

(This column is published in conjunction with the Corporate Realty, Design & Management Institute and the Center for Sustainable Real Estate. Click on [www.squarefootage.net](http://www.squarefootage.net) for a seminar schedule, books, and white papers on sustainability and high performance buildings. Whitson is seminar leader for three seminar programs this year - *TI's/Interior Fit Out: New Rules for 2005*, *It's The Money*, and *How To Sell Sustainability To Your Client*. You can contact Alan Whitson at [awhitson@squarefootage.net](mailto:awhitson@squarefootage.net)) ▲