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County says its buildings will meet LEED gold, unless it costs too much

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The King County Council passed an ordinance this week requiring that county construction and major renovation projects meet LEED gold standards and track the cost savings on operations and maintenance, while meeting strict budget constraints.

The ordinance also makes historic preservation a priority in meeting sustainability goals.

Under the legislation, all county capital projects must reach LEED gold, as long as there is no cost impact to the county's general fund and no more than a 2 percent cost impact to other funds. King County chose that percentage based on studies that say pursuing LEED can increase construction costs by two percent or less.

This ordinance replaces one from 2005 that said county buildings need to achieve the highest level of LEED possible. In recent years, King County has certified or is in the process of certifying 14 buildings to different levels of LEED.

Wendy Soohoo, senior legislative analyst with King County, helped write the legislation. She said it was important for the county to recognize a higher standard of green building, and to point out that it shouldn't cost much more than typical construction.

“It sends a message that we feel very strongly that buildings should be achieving at the gold rating, but given the financial crisis that the county is facing, we implemented certain cost restrictions,” she said.

Buildings paid for by the general fund must either meet LEED gold at no additional cost, or must meet the highest level of LEED possible. Buildings that do not receive county general funds must meet LEED gold at a cost increase of 2 percent or less.

Operations and maintenance cost savings must be projected before construction starts. After buildings are complete, King County will track the original measurements against actual performance. Most green buildings today do not track their performance, which Soohoo said is a problem.

By tracking how well these buildings perform, she said King County could make sure the legislation is doing its job.

“How can we know if it's effective if we don't track it after the building goes up?” she said. “(Buildings are) not necessarily performing over their life... so that's kind of the heart of what we're trying to do.”

The ordinance also says any county building that is not applicable for LEED must still use green features.

The legislation calls historic preservation a sustainable development strategy. It says any building the county owns that is a historic landmark, or is eligible for landmark status,

will be preserved unless the King County Landmarks Commission says preservation is unfeasible.

Buildings are eligible for landmark status if they are more than 40 years old and are historically or architecturally significant. Councilmember Bob Ferguson was largely responsible for including historic preservation in the legislation. Sam Downing, Ferguson's policy director, said a recent lecture from historic preservation expert Donovan Rypkema helped clarify the importance of saving historic buildings.

The landmarks commission also has the right to waive the LEED standard if it conflicts with landmark status. This is important, Downing said, because it adds another level of protection. "We wanted to protect historical resources from insensitive alterations in the name of going green because we believe, in most cases, those buildings are inherently green."

Most green building ordinances do not recognize historic preservation as a sustainable tool or track project performance. The ordinance lasts until Dec. 31, 2013, when it will be reviewed and evaluated.