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VIEWPOINT

Every day's Earth Day in LEED building

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Three components critical to business success are economics, employee talent and the environment. In honor of Earth Day this week, I'll focus on how the environmental component, specifically the places in which we do business, positively impacts the economy and employees.

Place is a common factor that impacts the recipe for success. Just like the "how much?" and the "who?" matters, place matters. It affects expenses and revenue, and place can make a customer say "yes" to a deal. Place affects employee recruitment and productivity, and it can motivate top talent to perform well. A place affects the business impact on a community by the amount of resources it uses and the amount of public space it offers.

Since 2000, companies around the world have been using Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design to certify that their real estate was designed and built and operates in a healthier, more efficient manner. LEED provides corporate value to the three critical business components of economy, employees and environment. LEED, along with the Global Reporting Initiative and Energy Star, is among a variety of national and international third-party tools available for a non-biased measurement of sustainability performance.

During the Great Recession years of 2007 to 2009, LEED certifications in our state more than doubled year over year, which speaks to the economic viability of the rating system. From commercial to residential projects, LEED is a framework for the design, construction and operation of buildings that maximizes efficiency, reduces waste and lowers the impacts of buildings on our health and our environment. In 2014, North Carolina was seventh in the nation for LEED building activity. There are 1,684 LEED-certified projects in North Carolina, with at least 215 in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Many iconic companies with operations in North Carolina, such as Columbia Forest Products Inc., Nucor Corp., Ingersoll Rand, BASF Corp., Wells Fargo & Co., Bank of America Corp., Duke Energy Corp. and Piedmont Natural Gas Co. Inc., benefit from LEED certification. They gain from one or more of the following factors: financial incentives in facility operations, increased sales of products or services, increased worker satisfaction and alignment with a corporate social-sustainability platform. The public sector benefits as well — federal, state and local government buildings in our state have followed LEED standards, including 201 military-base projects.

Wells Fargo is an example of the business case for healthier, higher-performing buildings with LEED. The U.S. Green Building Council announced last week that Wells Fargo has the most LEED-certified square footage in the global financial industry, according to a press release from the bank. With internal goals of increasing energy and water efficiency, and decreasing waste and greenhouse-gas emissions, LEED provides a system that helps the bank achieve its goals. In the release, Curt Radkin, sustainability strategist in Wells Fargo's corporate properties group, said, "By holding ourselves accountable to LEED standards, we are promoting a cleaner, more sustainable environment for the people who work and do business with us. LEED design elements like the use of natural light and construction materials that improve air quality aren't just good environmental stewardship — they're good for our business as well."

To further demonstrate the applicability and affordability of LEED, the Charlotte Housing Authority and Habitat for Humanity of Charlotte are using LEED to reduce monthly operating expenses and enhance the indoor quality in the homes of fixed-income residents.

The belief that LEED comes at a cost is in error. According to *Green Building: Project Planning & Cost Estimating* (RSMeans, 2011), the commonly held notion that green building necessitates higher costs has proved to be a false assumption. Additionally, the General Services Administration (the nation's largest public real estate organization) released a study in 2011 that shows LEED-certified buildings use 25% less energy and achieve a 19% reduction in operating costs compared with non-certified government buildings.

Bottom line, when business strategists are debating the top tools to improve performance, certified healthy, high-performing buildings should be part of the equation.

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