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Oak Park seeks 'green' credit for new public works facility

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When you first walk into Oak Park's new \$26 million public works facility, it's hard to tell what makes it different from the hundreds of other Illinois buildings that house snowplows, garbage trucks and police cars.

Until you look more closely.

There's no new-paint-and-carpet smell, thanks to the low-toxin materials builders used. Energy-efficient fluorescent bulbs on motion sensors illuminate the 155,000-square-foot, three-story building that officially opened in September. Up on the roof, row after row of small, sturdy plants limit runoff, and soon, solar panels will heat the water.

Oak Park officials hope it will be the first public-works facility in Illinois to win a coveted silver rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

Just 15 buildings in Illinois have earned a silver rating through the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, program.

Another 14 Illinois buildings can boast of a gold or platinum rating.

The rating system emphasizes state-of-the-art strategies for site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials, selecting resources and indoor environmental quality.

"In every community, the buzzword is sustainability," said Oak Park Public Works Director John Wielebnicki, who helped oversee the design and construction of the building at South Boulevard and Lombard Avenue. "We were looking for practical things to do."

After a July 2004 fire destroyed the public-works facility, local officials decided green was the way to go to help the environment and keep operating costs down, said Village Board President David Pope. In fact, any development projects that involve village land or support now must include plans to seek LEED certification, a step below the building council's silver rating, Pope said.

"Financial responsibility and environmental sustainability go hand in hand. You need to be thinking about how both of these can go together," Pope said. "This facility will be a strong addition to the



community, not just from an environmental standpoint but also from an economic standpoint."

Many cities across the nation have been going "green" in recent years. That includes Chicago, where Mayor Richard Daley wants his city to be the greenest in the U.S. Daley offers incentives to have more green buildings in the city. In fact, the Merchandise Mart this month became the largest building in the world to receive certification from the LEED program.

More and more suburbs are joining the movement. Aurora is seeking silver status from LEED for the design of its new \$62 million police headquarters. City Council members approved a \$230,900 contract Tuesday with Shaw Environmental that will make the building more energy efficient and incorporate alternative energy sources, including solar.

In Orland Park, a publishing company is developing a \$10 million green headquarters, expected to be completed in two years. The three-story building will feature native plant landscaping and floors raised so heat can come from below.

And officials overseeing the construction of a 213,000-square-foot, \$25.2 million public-works facility in Naperville plan to seek a silver rating from the Green Building Council.

"We think it's going to be a great opportunity to demonstrate leadership," said Dave Van Vooren, Naperville's director of public works.

Some City Council members at first worried a green building would cost more and do little to help the environment, he said. "We had to make sure the project had overall value to the community and we weren't just going for a plaque on the wall," Van Vooren said.

The Naperville building, scheduled for completion next November, will feature many of the same green elements of the Oak Park facility, including low-flush toilets, furniture made from recycled materials, and landscaping that requires little or no watering.

Although some green buildings can cost more to construct, "whatever added costs there may be are paid back relatively quickly in saved energy costs," said James Mann, executive director of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

The foundation gave \$100,000 grants to both Naperville and Oak Park to help pay for designing the public-works facilities. Oak Park also received \$13,500 to help cover the costs of 700 square feet of solar panels. Since 2001, the foundation has given more than 75 green design grants throughout Illinois.

"Green buildings aren't simply for Oak Park, Lincoln Park and Hyde Park," Mann said. "It's for your everyday buildings anywhere."

Oak Park's move to get the public-works facility a silver rating is spurring interest among developers working on retail and commercial projects.

"Now, whenever a building project comes before the village, people are asking questions. It's sending a signal to developers that you stand a better chance of getting your proposal approved" in Oak Park if green elements are included, said Gary Cuneen, executive director of Seven Generations Ahead, an Oak Park environmental group that advised village officials in the early months of design for the facility.

Developers of the Whiteco project at Harlem Avenue and Ontario Street agreed last year to pursue LEED certification, as will the Morningside project, a mix of commercial and residential units at South Boulevard and Harlem Avenue, Pope said.

"It's setting a tone for development within the village," Cuneen said. "And I think also it's setting a very clear message to the rest of the metro area that this has to be the way we design buildings in the future."

The public may tour the public-works facility from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

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