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Aspiring to be America's greenest city

State commitment helps Sacramento rank No. 2 in energyefficient office space.

By Mary Lynne Vellinga - Bee Staff Writer

Published 12:00 am PDT Wednesday, September 5, 2007

Green is the new black, and everyone wants to take a turn on the runway.

Sacramento is no exception. Its municipal leaders aspire to create the nation's greenest city -- a title also being pursued by cities such as Chicago and San Francisco.

"Our goal is to become the most sustainable city in America," said Sacramento City Councilman Rob Fong.

If that seems a tad ambitious, keep in mind Sacramento has a heavyweight helper in its quest: the state of California.

The California Environmental Protection Agency headquarters downtown was the first office building in the nation to earn the platinum rating from the U.S. Green Building Council, which developed the widely used Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system to measure a building's energy efficiency.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger now mandates that new state office buildings at minimum qualify for a LEED silver rating.

Developers submitting bids on a 1.4 million-square-foot state office complex in the works must not only meet the silver standard, but also show their buildings will produce 10 percent of their own power with solar panels or through some other method, said Anne Cavanagh, a project manager with the state Department of General Services.

"That's a new thing for the state," Cavanagh said.

A Bee analysis of data from the U.S. Green Building Council found that Sacramento has the second-largest quantity of LEED-certified office space in the nation with 4.3 million square feet, the bulk of it in state-occupied buildings.

Sacramento trails only Chicago, which has been showered with media attention for Mayor Richard M. Daley's quest to go green.

Chicago, where high-rises seem to sprout almost daily, has 5.2 million square feet of LEED-certified space.

San Francisco has 1.1 million square feet; Los Angeles, 1.85 million.

"Being the state capital is a big advantage," Fong said.

Being near the University of California, Davis, also gives the area a boost as a potential center of green technology, said city leaders. In addition, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District is considered a leader in promoting solar power and renewable energy.

"We've got some progressive utilities, and we've got a great climate for solar," said Jim Bayless, president of Treasure Homes, which is finishing a development of 32 energy-efficient, solar-powered homes in South Natomas.

Like many cities, Sacramento is working on its own sustainability plan to reduce the city's energy use and contribution to global warming. Sacramento also requires that new city buildings meet the LEED silver threshold.

City staff members are drawing up a list of incentives to encourage green building by private sector developers. Another possibility: an enterprise zone for green technology companies.

One of the first steps the city took was to have its greenhouse gas emissions certified by the California Climate Action Registry, said Keith Roberts, a senior engineer in the city's General Services Department who is responsible for keeping track of the city's energy use.

The city of Sacramento was responsible for 63,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions in 2005, a decrease from the prior year but still a 16 percent increase over 1990, Roberts said.

Sacramento's goal is to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2030, Roberts said. Schwarzenegger has issued an executive order calling on local governments to lower their carbon emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, he said.

Roberts has cobbled together a draft "climate plan" with proposed programs to achieve this goal. He figures they would cost about \$850,000 a year.

He has yet to win approval from the City Council. "I'm trying to get consensus now that this is what we should be doing," he said.

At this point, the city's sustainability efforts rank somewhere in the middle of what municipalities around the country are doing, said David Gottfried, who originally developed the LEED rating system and now works as senior vice president for sustainable development at Thomas Properties Group, which manages the Cal-EPA building.

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