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Hospitals build healthier environment

Green design - Coming to health care near you: solar panels, reused rainwater and recycled construction waste

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When Oregon Health & Science University's first South Waterfront building opens Sunday, its toilets will flush with rainwater. Its staircases will be ventilated with outdoor air. And solar energy will help heat its water and provide electricity.

The center, probably the nation's most environmentally minded medical building, is one of several Portland-area health care buildings embracing green design. Medical providers want to show patients, employees and the public that they care about the environment, from the ozone layer to the cleanliness of air inside exam rooms.

"It was an issue and a concept that we all knew and embraced," said Dr. Neil Swanson, president of OHSU Medical Group, the majority owner of the building. "Our challenge to them was we would really like to do this and have many reasons to do this -- as long as we can afford to do this in the scope of the building."

The Center for Health & Healing marks one of several Portland-area projects, from Newberg to Portland's Gateway area, that show that ecological medical buildings not only are possible, they're affordable, true to medicine's core values and highly marketable.

Hospitals are in a national race to replace buildings from the last hospital building boom, from 1946 to 1976, said Leonard Friedman, associate professor of public health at Oregon State University. Hundreds of buildings from that era are scheduled to be replaced or modernized, he said.

"There's nothing wrong with the quality of care, but if you have the opportunity to build a new hospital, you're not going to build it in the same way you did 30 and 40 years ago," he said. "Green building design is just one attribute of a larger set of changes."

For the health care industry, one appeal of green buildings is a recognition that some hospitals where people were treated for cancer and other ailments were composed of materials linked to cancer. **Becoming green**

Environmental design has gained acceptance in the development industry since the 2000 introduction of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED. Administered by the U.S. Green Building Council, the certification program lays out more than 60 criteria buildings can meet to be called environmentally friendly.

Early on, governments and nonprofits led the way in using LEED to guide their construction projects, said Ralph DiNola, principal of Green Building Services, Inc., a Portland based consulting firm.

But in recent years, commercial real estate firms that make office buildings have caught on to the idea that highly energy efficient buildings can save money, improve employee health and add valuable marketing panache to a building.

So why was health care behind?

"The LEED certification was really tailored to office buildings, and hospitals have a lot of unique needs," said Stacy Malkan, spokeswoman for HealthCare Without Harm, an international organization seeking to improve the industry's environmental track record. "Special thought has to go into how to green health care facilities."

There's a perception that green features add costs more than conventional building practices, and that scares many in an industry in which revenues are shrinking, Malkan said.

"Health care institutions are generally cautious about rapidly changing what they're doing," DiNola said. "But there's an interest in innovation."

Values match

The selling point for green building techniques starts from the core values of the health care industry, DiNola said. Physicians genuinely want to help people, and they want their buildings to do the same, he said.

The Providence Health System added stewardship to the organization's core missions and values, said DiNola, whose firm consulted on Providence Newberg Medical Center.

"They're coming to this from a perspective of trying to align their values with their practices," DiNola said.

Providence Newberg Medical Center has received a gold rating under the LEED system, the highest rating for a full-service hospital building. The OHSU Center is expecting a platinum rating from the LEED system.

But some health care providers have chosen other rating systems instead of LEED.

Legacy Health System's new Salmon Creek hospital in Clark County was named one of America's Top 10 Green Hospitals by The Green Guide, an environmental magazine. That review took into account a variety of factors and certification programs.

But Salmon Creek wasn't certified in the LEED program, though it has many of the same attributes as LEED buildings. Legacy and some others in the industry, including Oakland, Calif.-based health care giant Kaiser Permanente have resisted LEED, saying the system doesn't account for a hospital's unique energy, waste and air quality requirements.

Kaiser Permanente helped develop the Green Guide for Health Care standard, a LEED-like tool tailored specifically for health care organizations. Elements of that program will be integrated into a new LEED prototype next year.

But unlike LEED, the Green Guide for Health Care doesn't require third-party certification.

Tax credits

The green building and health care industries appear to be coming closer together, in part with government prodding. The Portland Development Commission insisted that South Waterfront projects all be built to achieve at least LEED Silver certification, the third highest standard. And the Oregon Department of Energy gives tax credits for buildings that meet LEED standards -- a credit that will give OHSU hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Penny pinching and learning are still a big part of the health care approach to green building. The Oregon Clinic didn't know any of the tax or other benefits of LEED until developer Gerding/Edlen Development Co. explained how the system works, said Dr. Craig Fausel, chief executive of The Oregon Clinic.

"We couldn't have done this by ourselves," Fausel said.

To keep costs down, OHSU Medical Group jettisoned an idea of installing wind turbines on top of its new

building, Swanson said.

"It would have turned out to be some expensive artwork."

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