Sustainability Also Applies to Business Viability
(By Frank Musica, Victor O. Schinnerer & Company, Inc.)

Designing for sustainability involves c

environmental and financial paybacks. Or the interest may be forced from outside influences including imprudent government regulations.

The expectation that there will be a payback in decreased energy consumption or other costs to offset their investment often is fostered in part by the “sales pitch” associated with green design recognition programs. Programs such as LEED or Green Globes create a prize for a “green” project result. And now, as political bodies react to increasing public pressure, many of these certification programs that add time and cost to a project are being incorporated into government edicts.

Green design, however, is more than adding up points to attain a rating. Sustainability in design and construction requires more than having a ticket punched or displaying a rating like a trophy.

And consumer enthusiasm for green design, inappropriate government regulation and certification programs that force features to be added—or deleted—without recognition of real needs and sustainability options often result in dissatisfaction and claims.

Managing and Documenting Client Expectations

Sustainability in design and construction should not be pursued without a comprehensive understanding of the consequences. A thoughtful and knowledgeable consideration of the long-term operating and environmental impacts of a project is essential.

It is vital to have open and thorough communication concerning reasonable expectations of sustainability. Any client should understand that success in achieving the environmental objectives necessitates an integrated design and construction approach and active involvement by the client in the operations and maintenance of the building. Contractors and sub trades must both understand the goals and be involved in the many activities that allow the goals to be reached so that sound construction techniques and sensitivity to environmental matters such as the recycling of waste and the use of environmentally friendly techniques and processes are built into the process.

And clients who demand green design must understand that their expectations need to take into account that green design projects are not the same as what they have experienced in the past. Green projects have different performance characteristics and different operational requirements.

But not all who profess an interest in green design take their role seriously. For instance, an unengaged client such as a home buyer who wants a green “seal of approval” but does not understand the what costs and other consideration go into a green design may be surprised—and disappointed—at the consequences. Too often achieving a cumbersome sustainable design certification or meeting government standards is the goal without an understanding that certification is not a commodity and government requirements that a project conforms to one specific evaluation system, often do not provide real value for the project user.

To attain the benefits of green design, everyone, including the project owner, has to make a genuine commitment to invest in the process including the design, construction, operation and maintenance measures required to achieve a minimal environmental impact while meeti healthful interior environment, the expectations are real even if often unrealistic. Unless the risk of misunderstanding and idealistic expectations about comfort, performance and maintenance are minimized, green projects may produce red ink and challenge the business viability of the design and construction entities.

Author Information:

Frank Musica is the Senior Risk Management Attorney for Victor O. Schinnerer & Company, Inc. and provides educational programs and management assistance to design firms and contractors in the Schinnerer design liability program with CNA. The Schinnerer program insures over 21,000 firms and is celebrating its 50th anniversary as the nation's leading professional liability insurance provider.