

Sustainable building plans greenest of green

by Dylan Rivera, The Oregonian
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To solidify Oregon's reputation as the center of all things environmentally sound, Portland may soon be home to the greenest large building in the world.

More than a dozen businesses, nonprofits and universities are working with the Oregon University System to create the Oregon Sustainability Center, a high-rise office building near Portland State University that would showcase the region's expertise in developing and designing earth-friendly buildings.

"This is like building a green stake in the ground in Portland," said Jay Kenton, vice chancellor of the Oregon University System. "We're going to do something no one else has done. It's going to brand us as a leader in many ways in doing that."

Backers intend for the building to meet the highest environmental standard devised in the world, the Living Building Challenge. An amalgam of audacious goals, the Living Building Challenge exceeds the highest standards that are gaining industry acceptance.

More than a look-at-me demonstration, the building's first purpose would be to draw visitors from the U.S. and the around the world to learn about green building practices and to find Oregon-based companies to hire.

Backers say the center would also function as a technology incubator where university researchers test new ways to make buildings with the lightest possible environmental footprint. The center would meet its own energy needs on-site with renewable power and use locally produced nontoxic building materials. Such a monument to low impact would come at a steep price: \$80 million to start. How the project would be funded, or how much it would rely on taxpayers, is not certain.

No date has been set for construction to begin.

Organizers say the building's tenants would pay the bulk of the costs. By this summer, a feasibility study will outline what it will take to make the vision reality. State energy efficiency tax credits and urban renewal money are potential sources to help meet the added costs that often come with experimental buildings.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Portland Mayor Sam Adams are pushing for the center and consider it part of their economic development strategies. Kulongoski included \$80 million in the budget in higher education revenue bonds -- to be paid back by the businesses and nonprofits that occupy the building.

"I think this is the future," Kulongoski said last week. "More and more, as people learn about the issue of climate change, they'll realize that Portland is the center of sustainability."

With growing international attention on climate change, the American Institute of Architects has pointed to buildings as leading contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. Commercial, residential and industrial buildings account for nearly half of the nation's energy consumption.

Oregon Sustainability Center

For more information on the Living Building Challenge and the Oregon Sustainability Center, see:

- The Oregon Living Building Initiative, groups that intend to rent or own space in the center: livingbuilding.wordpress.com

- The Living Building Challenge: www.cascadiagbc.org/lbc

The team performing a feasibility study for the project: Gerding Edlen Development, Hoffman Construction, SERA Architects, GBD Architects, and engineering firms Glumac, Interface Engineering and PAE Consulting Engineers.

-- Dylan Rivera

Meanwhile, Oregon-based architects and developers have designed many celebrated earth-friendly buildings. The Portland region has the highest concentration in the U.S. of real estate professionals and buildings certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standard, the most recognized green building standard in commercial real estate.

The idea of a sustainability center hatched in the minds of several people over at least three years.

Sean Penrith, executive director of Earth Advantage Inc., decided three years ago that his nonprofit should be housed in an urban building that shows off the cutting edge of green design.

“The biggest thing we have to overcome is the perception that the boundaries that we need to go beyond are always impossible,” Penrith said.

Penrith found Andrea Durbin, executive director of the Oregon Environmental Council, pursuing a similar concept. Last year they met with Kenton, who was also dreaming about a sustainability-focused center for academic research.

“Sustainability is kind of this emerging science,” Kenton said. “Why couldn’t we be the first in the country to get a national sustainability research center?”

The sustainability center could encompass 250,000 square feet, mostly for businesses and nonprofits, but also space for a half-dozen state university and city offices.

Penrith and Durbin now lead the Oregon Living Building Initiative, a consortium of mainly environmental organizations that are starting to raise money for their portion of space in the building.

The Portland Development Commission is handling the real estate side of the project. The agency has offered a three-quarters of a block tract it owns at Southwest Fourth Avenue and Montgomery Street. The site abuts the new MAX light rail line and must incorporate a long-planned extension of the Portland Streetcar through the property.

When the PDC sought developers to study the project’s feasibility, with the chance of constructing it in the end, the agency received 11 proposals, from as far away as Germany. Winning was a team that included Gerding Edlen Development, Hoffman Construction and an unusual joint effort by two local architecture firms and three local engineering firms.

Jason F. McLennan, the Seattle-based chief executive of the Cascadia Region Green Building Council, dreamed up the Living Building Challenge and counts about 60 building projects that may attempt to meet it.

None are close to the scale Portland envisions.

“It’s international-level leadership,” McLennan said. “So let’s hope they succeed.”

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