Chicago Can Share Best Practices for a Green Economy

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Chicago: Home of the Cubs, the Blues Brothers, deep-dish pizza, and more LEED-certified municipal buildings than any other city in the U.S.(Not to mention Chicago ranks #1 in total square footage of LEED space, and the entire state of Illinois ranks third in the country on a per-capita basis).

Surprised? Chicago is known internationally for its iconic culinary delights, arts, culture and landmarks; less so for its leadership in sustainability. This week, I joined a group of businesses and city officials in an effort to change all that - because when it comes to talking about the Green Economy, Chicago has a lot to say.

The USGBC Illinois Chapter partnered with USGBC, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) to host a forum "Exploring the Role Cities and Buildings in the Green Economy" – one event in the series Road to Rio +20. The goal of this collaboration is twofold: To share with global citizens models of success and to underscore the economy-wide benefits of pursuing green building strategies as the world gathers this June at Rio +20 to chart a new pathway for the environment.

As we heard from Chicago's Chief Sustainability Officer Karen Weigert, Chicago has an ambitious Climate Action Plan that outlines a path toward economic and environmental sustainability. Improving the energy efficiency of our buildings and our transportation system are two of the major strategies for achieving the Plan's goal of reducing emissions by 25% below 1990 levels and creating 25,000 jobs by the year 2020, combined with smart grid technology, green roofs, and renewable energy supply.

In large part due to the leadership of the Public Building Commission (PBC), the Chicago government is setting an example through its own commitment to green new and existing city buildings. The PBC currently has 72 LEED-certified or registered projects, and is also embarking on a multi-agency procurement program for Energy Performance Contracting (EPC) which has the potential to save $9 million in energy cost savings over a 15 year period per building – all with no up front costs to the taxpayer.

Chicago is displaying exactly the type of government leadership we need in order to make the transition to a Green Economy. USGBC-Illinois and our network of leaders in the business community are supporting implementation and continuing to drive best practices in green building and city planning. Rio +20 represents an opportunity for Chicago and other cities to share our success stories and our obstacles and to learn from one another, in order to drive transformation faster and further.

At our Road to Rio +20 Event, we also asked stakeholders to consider barriers to achieving more resource-efficient building and cities and the types of policies and partnerships that could be forged in Rio to overcome them. Here are some things we heard:

- Programs and activities to raise awareness and advance education about the benefits of green, energy-efficient buildings are desperately needed to address market barriers.
- Governments could consider building-sector targets as part of their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as committing to develop a certain number of LEED for Neighborhood Development projects by 2020, or, taking on the 2030 Challenge.
- More discussion is needed on standardizing metrics-- global goals must respect there is no "one size fits all" approach, yet we must measure, monitor, and verify across all stages in the building life cycle in order to truly realize the benefits of green building.

These are a just a few ideas from Chicago on the Road to Rio +20 – what are yours?

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Member employees, Chapter members

1 comment

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Chicago is still the center of the green and LEED building universe!

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