



Overcoming Zoning and Code-Based Challenges to Build Sustainable Communities

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Written by Aaron Lande

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The [LEED for Neighborhood Development](#) rating system has been out in the marketplace and available to developers for several months now. With its release, interest continues to grow, both among local governments seeking a tool to achieve sustainability goals; and developers looking for a way to distinguish and strengthen their communities and cut carbon emissions.

Unfortunately, LEED for Neighborhood Development is met with many challenges from existing zoning standards that reflect a bias against compact development, ranging from density maximums, to parking minimums, to bans on mixed use zoning. This all reflects the now outdated mindset of planners and policy makers from generations past, who were ruled by the automobile.

Since the benefits of sustainable communities, like the kind fostered by LEED for Neighborhood Development, are incredibly far-reaching and impactful, finding methods to work with outdated standards or change existing codes altogether is crucial. Sustainable communities promote:

- Economic diversity
- Greater convenience for residents by ensuring that the essentials for everyday life (work, food, entertainment) are accessible without having to drive
- A sense of community and civic engagement, leading to increased safety
- Public health by allowing residents to walk and bike through their communities

The good news is that strides are being made to reduce the challenges that Neighborhood Development projects face, improving the ease in which walkable, sustainable communities can be incorporated in to our cities. USGBC is currently working with Pace University's [Land Use Law Center](#), with funding from the [Oram Foundation: Fund for Environment & Urban Life](#), to develop a technical assistance manual and model overlay zone for local governments to work to remove these code barriers. These resources will be made available to local governments in the fall.

Also, USGBC is now hosting an exhibit about LEED for Neighborhood Development, enabling our staff to work with local governments to raise awareness of the program and enact policy change. The [Neighborhoods Go Green](#) exhibit, which USGBC co-curated with the Chicago Architecture Foundation and Farr Associates, has been on display at the Chicago Architecture Foundation since Nov. 14, and will soon be open at the AIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., from Mar. 14-Apr. 21. As part of the exhibit, USGBC assembled panels in Chicago and D.C. (forthcoming), consisting of local chapter members, and state and local government officials and staff to discuss how to encourage LEED for Neighborhood Development projects, and how to remove existing barriers to sustainable communities.

In line with efforts to promote modern zoning codes and remove blocks to sustainable community projects, it's worth noting that many LEED for Neighborhood Development projects have spurred important code-related changes or solutions within their communities.


In Cleveland, Ohio, three high-profile LEED for Neighborhood Development pilot projects have given the city an opportunity to rethink how to create policies and tools to support green projects. With close involvement from the city, project team members and representatives from the Cleveland Foundation were able to create a set of green design guidelines that acted as an overlay for the three project sites. This meant that projects teams did not have to seek individual variances each time LEED for Neighborhood Development principles conflicted with current regulations. Similar success was seen in Nashville, Tenn., when the city adopted a new Downtown Code (DTC) in response to numerous projects seeking rezoning or variances.


Above all, LEED is a powerful tool for communities looking to reduce their carbon emissions, and can help local governments rethink the regulations and design of their communities. Roughly 38% of carbon emissions in the U.S. can be attributed to buildings, with another 30% coming from the transportation sector. Redesigning our communities to better promote walkability and alternative forms of transportation, practices fostered by programs like LEED for Neighborhood Development, will go a long way toward reducing carbon emissions and accomplishing the goals set forth in the [U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement](#). Working to overcome code-based challenges is an important step in getting there.

More information:

LEED for Neighborhood Development is a voluntary rating system that

incorporates the principles of smart growth, New Urbanism and green building into a national standard. It was developed in partnership by the [U.S. Green Building Council](#), [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) and [Congress for the New Urbanism](#). For more information, consult the [Local Government Guide to LEED for Neighborhood Development](#) and stay tuned for additional resources this spring.



Aaron Lande 

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