

SITES: Helping governments support nature-based solutions for climate, resilience, biodiversity, and community health

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[SITES](#) is a rating system that guides, evaluates, and certifies a project's sustainability in the planning, design, construction, and management of landscapes and other outdoor spaces. SITES guides implementation of nature-based solutions with benefits of enhancing biodiversity, fostering resilience, mitigating climate change, reducing pollution, conserving resources, improving public health, and protecting critical ecosystems.

The central objective of the SITES program is for any project—whether the site of a university campus, residential subdivision, park, commercial facility, transit center, or even a zoo—to realize its potential to protect, improve, and regenerate the benefits and services provided by healthy ecosystems. SITES is the ideal tool to support nature positive design.

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1. Leveraging SITES for the Public Good

Governments at all levels can leverage SITES for the public good. As of March 2024, over 25 local governments, two states, and one federal agency have referenced SITES in their policies. The new resource, [Designing for the Future: Incorporating SITES into sustainable landscape regulations](#) (Paul Wessel, The Sustainable SITES Initiative, 2024) details these policies and characteristics such as thresholds and applicability. Below, we highlight some examples.

Local Adoption of SITES

The [City of Austin](#) has reaffirmed its commitment to a more sustainable, resilient, and healthy place for community members to call home through adoption of a SITES certification requirement for Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) projects over \$2 million. [Austin is the first city worldwide to incorporate the rating system into local policy](#) and currently has more participating SITES projects than anywhere in the world (as of May 2024).

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SITES provides long-term benefits with projects that appreciate in value. “By using the SITES framework to guide the development of our landscape projects, PARD hopes to improve quality of life and human health by supporting and regenerating our ecosystem and built environment,” said Liana Kallivoka, PhD, PE, LEED Fellow, and PARD’s Assistant Director overseeing capital improvement projects. “Clean air and water, and a thriving ecosystem are essential to the health and well-being of humans and all life around us.”

The [Atlanta BeltLine](#) is a sustainable development project that is one of the most comprehensive urban design efforts under way in the United States, aiming to connect 45 in-town neighborhoods via a 22-mile loop of multi-use trails, modern streetcar lines, parks, and open space. In 2018, the Atlanta BeltLine project, a public-private partnership, adopted SITES. [All newly designed parks in the Atlanta BeltLine are required to achieve SITES Silver or Gold certification.](#)

SITES demonstrates short-term results, according to Kevin Burke, Director of Design at Atlanta Beltline Inc. “We are at 90% design drawings for a new Atlanta BeltLine project, Enota Park, and we are already seeing the results of SITES. Some team members -- not normally engaged from the beginning -- have opportunity for input from the start. This results in a much more integrated design. And using the SITES process, we expect to see a reduction in Change Orders which will result in cost savings.”

States Use SITES to Act on Climate

[Rhode Island is the first state to incorporate SITES into statewide public policy.](#) Rhode Island’s governor, Daniel McKee, signed H-7278 Sub A/S-2700 Sub A into law, enacting substantial improvements to the Green Buildings Act, a landmark piece of legislation first adopted in 2009. The legislation expands the requirement that public projects meet a LEED, LEED for Neighborhood Development, and/or SITES certification to include public buildings, public structures, and public real property of cities and local governments.

“The 2022 Green Buildings Act (GBA) is significant: for its making history in 2009, 2017 and 2022; [for] building on Rhode Island’s being the first state in the nation to adopt LEED, LEED for Neighborhood Development and SITES into public law; and now for its timeliness to support and implement our Act on Climate statutory initiatives at this critical time in our ecology,” said architect and USGBC Rhode Island chair and co-founder Kenneth J. Filarski, LEED Fellow who contributed to the bill. “The GBA directly addresses climate change and greenhouse gas emission reductions, holistically leveraging and integrating the ecosystem services we can provide, completing the continuum of resilience and sustainability in our buildings, structures and landscapes.”

Federal Leadership by Example

In 2015, [GSA reached a decision to adopt the SITES certification program](#), with a minimum Silver rating, for GSA’s capital construction program. This decision was

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originally memorialized in the 2016 version of GSA's Facilities Standards for the Public Buildings Service (P-100) document and has been renewed again in subsequent editions.

"The quality and performance of GSA's delivered projects is directly correlated with our ability to meet our sustainability goals. We utilize the SITES certification program as both a lens and a yard stick; a sustainability framework to focus our decision-making and to quantitatively measure success," said Brandon Hartz, Senior Landscape Architect with GSA's Public Buildings Service.

Case Study: Pete V. Domenici U.S. Courthouse



Figure 1: Pete V. Domenici U.S. Courthouse, Albuquerque, NM, SITES certified

The SITES certified [Pete V. Domenici U.S. Courthouse Sustainable Landscape Renovation](#) in Albuquerque, NM creates an exemplary landscape rooted within its context. Deriving patterns from regional and site history, the project creates a bold landscape and dignified setting for court operations while enhancing efficiency and sustainable operations through improved water management, decreased energy use, and increased urban habitat. The federal courthouse earned SITES certification as part of GSA's SITES standard.

2. SITES Supports Government Goals

SITES Fosters Resilience and Addresses a Changing Climate

[SITES enhances resilience](#) to adverse weather and climate-related events including floods, fires, landslides, drought, and extreme heat. For example, SITES fosters resilience to drought by promoting the use of native, drought tolerant vegetation and minimizing potable water use, including surface water and groundwater withdrawals. By designing for resilience, SITES projects can avoid damage, reduce risk, mitigate pollution, protect gray infrastructure, and recover quickly when disaster strikes, all while providing numerous co-benefits like enhancing biodiversity and reducing urban heat island effects.

SITES Saves Money

Sustainable outdoor spaces use less energy, water, and resources, all of which save taxpayer money. For example, U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) found that

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[green roofs pay for themselves](#) in about 6 years with a 224% return on investment. Additionally, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reviewed 17 case studies related to green infrastructure and found that [total capital cost savings ranged from 15 to 80%](#) when green infrastructure was used. On a smaller scale, the installation and maintenance of a sustainable, native residential garden in the City of Santa Monica was compared to a traditional garden in a [2013 study](#). The study showed that the native garden's lower maintenance requirements translate to [\\$2,200 per year in cost savings](#) while upfront costs were only slightly higher.

SITES Provides Transparency and Accountability

Third-party verification helps guarantee that taxpayer dollars are being well-spent on sustainable, resilient spaces that save energy, water, and money. "SITES was an important tool that kept our entire team accountable to a high standard of best practice and resulted in an unprecedented project—the transformation of Chicago's Navy Pier into an authentic and green destination reflective of the city's identity," [said project team member James Corner](#), founder and design director of James Corner Field Operations.

3. How SITES Works

By providing performance measures rather than prescribing practices, SITES supports the unique conditions of each site, encouraging project teams to be flexible and creative as they develop beautiful, functional, and regenerative landscapes. The [SITES v2 Rating System](#) is a 200-point system with four certification levels of achievement:

- Certified: 70-84 points
- Silver: 85-99 points
- Gold: 100-134 points
- Platinum: 135+ points



Figure 2: Chicago Navy Pier, Chicago, IL, Certified SITES v2 Gold

SITES addresses various contexts and stages of development from the planning stage to design and construction, and through ongoing site management. As such, there are three ways to apply SITES and get recognized for a project's achievements:

- Projects in the Planning Phase (SITES Precertification)
- New Construction and Major Renovation of Existing Sites
- Existing, Built Landscapes (currently in pilot phase)

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Additionally, the SITES v2 Rating System can be applied worldwide to a variety of project types located on sites with or without buildings, including open spaces, plazas, retail and office areas, neighborhoods, government facilities, campuses, military bases, residential yards, museums, infrastructure, hospitals, and streetscapes.

4. SITES Comes with a Mature Support System

As of summer 2024, [more than 360 projects](#) are participating in the SITES program, covering 1.3 billion gross square feet of outdoor space. This includes more than 140 certified and precertified projects and covers 41 US states and Washington, DC, and 23 countries. To support this demand, SITES offers education programs and resources, a professional credential that demonstrates proficiency in SITES, and a community partner program.

Education & Resources

SITES is dedicated to fostering a transformation in land design and development practices to bring ecosystem services to the forefront of decision-making and implementation. To this end, SITES offers [professional education programs and materials](#) that provide distinct learning opportunities for those in the land design and development fields in both the public and private sectors. [Numerous resources](#) help teams learn how to get started with SITES, including the SITES v2 Reference Guide, free introductory webinar series, project case studies, and slide decks.

USGBC Education offers 20 **free** on-demand courses about SITES. [Check them out!](#)

SITES Practitioners Community

Find SITES practitioners near you via the [SITES AP community directory!](#)

The [SITES Accredited Professional](#) (SITES AP) provides professionals with the opportunity to increase and demonstrate their knowledge, expertise, and commitment to sustainable land development. The SITES AP credential is appropriate for landscape architects, sustainability consultants, planners, ecologists, urban designers, and others interested in nature-based solutions, optimizing ecosystem services, and overall, ensuring outcomes of a development project are sustainable, resilient, and regenerative. SITES APs are located across the world in over 25 countries.

SITES Community Partner Program

Aside from projects and professionals, GBCI created the [Community Partner program](#) as a means to engage a network of academic institutions, nonprofits, government agencies

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and design, planning and consulting firms. SITES Community Partners such as the United States Botanic Garden, City of Austin Parks & Recreation, and the City of Palm Bay, FL have committed to prioritizing sustainable, resilient, and healthy landscapes as well as promoting the adoption of SITES. In turn, they receive public recognition as a SITES Community Partner, the opportunity to influence future direction of SITES, and early access to SITES updates.

5. LEED and SITES Work Together

The SITES v2 Rating System provides a comprehensive framework for designing, developing, and managing sustainable and resilient landscapes and other outdoor spaces. It was originally modeled after and aligns with LEED, where applicable. SITES and LEED—both owned and managed by USGBC/GBCI—are designed to harmonize with opportunities to transform properties and strengthen the vitality of communities and ecosystems as a whole. The SITES and LEED rating systems are complementary and can be used independently or in parallel. Learn more about the LEED and SITES synergies [here](#).

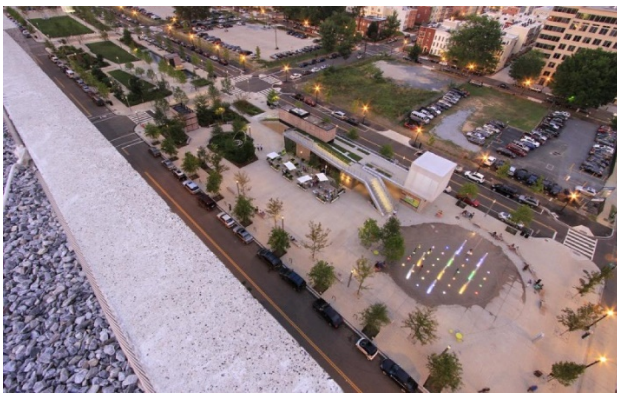


Figure 3: Washington Canal Park, Washington, DC, SITES certified and LEED Gold certified



Figure 4: Phipps Center for Sustainable Landscapes, Pittsburgh, PA, Certified LEED Platinum and SITES Platinum

To learn more, [sign up for SITES email updates](#) or contact us at publicpolicies@usgbc.org