

# Build Green to Save Green: The Lure of LEED in Senior Housing

By Jason Oliva

A trend has sprouted among companies nationwide as more businesses seek eco-friendly development plans during early construction stages, and it's spreading to senior living.

For many developers, the decision to "go green" is based on the benefits of long-term financial savings and future returns on investments (ROI), according to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

Given these incentives, developers and building owners have considered it a smart business to invest a percentage of project costs to lock down the long-term savings offered by green construction, notes the USGBC, as many energy-efficient projects can see internal return rates of 20% or more.

While some of the materials used in construction can be moderately priced, total price depends on the costs of retrofitting a building with such environmentally-conscious features, notes John McIlwain, Urban Land Institute's (ULI) senior resident fellow and the J. Ronald Terwilliger chair for housing.

Features such as increasing the amount of natural light inside a facility can have positive effects for staff and residents alike, since daylight is recognized as something positive for people's emotional and physical well-being, McIlwain told SHN.

He also notes that light wells—a common feature in green construction—not only create more available natural light, but also reduce the amount of electricity needed in coherence with green buildings' aim of lowering operating costs through emissions reduction and use of low volatile organic compounds (VOCs), as advertised by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Adults will be attracted to green housing as they near the age appropriate for living in senior housing, says McIlwain.

"It tends to be that people who are a certain age want to be healthy," he says. "They want to go to a place that they perceive as healthy, and that they perceive where the residents will have a positive, upbeat attitude toward life."

The popularity of environmentally "healthy" development is two-fold: not only do green buildings reduce emissions, but they can also enhance the well-being of their inhabitants. For one senior housing community, this second part of the equation carried greater weight in the decision to go green.

The Mather, a Mather LifeWays continuing care retirement facility (CCRC) in Evanston, IL was recently awarded LEED Gold certification for its second phase of construction and is currently the only CCRC in the nation to achieve a Gold LEED rating.

LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification consists of a ratings system for the design and construction of green buildings, where companies must accumulate points across various categories that will contribute to their overall LEED score. To obtain certification, projects must satisfy all LEED prerequisites and earn a minimum 40 points on a 110-point rating system scale.

Main scoring categories for LEED certification include strategies that minimize construction's impact on water resources and eco-systems, while also promoting energy conservation through the use of sustainable building materials and reduction of waste. Other points can be achieved by virtue of location, or constructing on previously developed sites that promote walkable neighborhoods with access to open space and efficient transportation.

Having a location just minutes from downtown Chicago added to The Mather's allure. The building has been outfitted with

adaptive landscaping to reduce irrigation needs, energy efficient lighting fixtures, and reflective roofing materials to increase the amount of indoor natural light, says Joe Zajdel, vice president of business development at Mather LifeWays.

"Older adults are interested in knowing that the home they are going to live in has a low carbon footprint, a low impact on the environment, as well as being a healthy place to live in terms of indoor air quality," says Zajdel.

Mather is confident that its construction costs will be worth the effort.

"There are additional costs involved with green components that over the long run will be paid for," said Zajdel, who believes that the effort to "go green" will ultimately be beneficial to the community and pay for itself in terms of long-term results.

The healthy building trend can be seen almost anywhere nowadays. From libraries and hotels, to baseball stadiums (Nationals Park) and even stores like the Home Depot, companies nationwide have been bitten by the "green" bug. However, obtaining LEED status has not necessarily been a focus for senior housing, says McIlwain, who says the ULI does not come across many of these types of certifications in the industry.

Senior communities looking to attract upcoming generations environmentally-conscious residents while cutting down on energy costs may want to pursue the green route.

"Sustainability was among our many goals for The Mather," said Mary Leary, president and CEO of Mather LifeWays. "Achieving a LEED Gold rating means we've accomplished that and more—not only for The Mather residents, but also for the environment."