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UCSB, Bank of America and Kohl's LEED the way in rankings

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The largest green buildings in the region are, not surprisingly, owned by some of the largest companies that operate in the Tri-Counties. Bank of America and retailer Kohl's each own hundreds of thousands of square feet of commercial space that are Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design-certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.

But smaller participants, including wineries, technology companies, architecture firms and trash haulers have also opted to go green — a pricey upfront investment that can often yield significant cost-savings over the long haul.

On the public side, universities are leading the way on LEED, with Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's on-campus Poly Canyon Village being the largest such project in the region. The 1.4 million-square-foot project features apartment-style dorms for undergraduates as well as restaurants and retail space.

UC Santa Barbara, meanwhile, is home to 10 of the 15 largest public LEED-certified projects in the region, including its recreational center. [See the full lists, page 15A]. "In green, or 'high performance' buildings, efficient use of energy and water reduces the campus' ecological footprint, and also reduces operating costs," the university said in a statement. "Green buildings promote high indoor air quality and strive to create comfortable indoor environments, making them better places to work and learn."

California has more LEED buildings than any other state in country, said Michelle Zimney, president of the Central Coast chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council. "The Western U.S. has about 30 percent of the LEED buildings in the country. ... Locally, we've had more interest on both at the residential and commercial side. With the downturn in construction and the economy in general, green building had to make its case, and we've worked to make that case," she said. "It's a business decision."

The USGBC is the membership-based non-profit group that certifies LEED buildings.

One of the largest privately owned LEED projects in the region is Volkswagen Group of America's 68,684-square-foot testing center in Oxnard. The \$27 million project, located at 201 Del Norte, does emissions testing for Volkswagen cars before they're shipped out to dealers in the U.S. and abroad.

Matthias Barke, general manager of the Oxnard test center, said the decision to go green comes from the top down — Volkswagen's leaders in Europe have pushed LEED building at every level.

Going green isn't just about being eco-groovy, business leaders say. It's often a calculated business decision about minimizing a building's operating costs while offering a better working environment for employees.

Barke said that while the rewards of energy and water efficiency can take decades to offset the higher construction and planning costs, a better work environment kicks in immediately. "We wanted to realize the benefits on day one," he said. "We went from 40-year-old facility ... The difference now with the employees, if you do a survey here now, is that they're much happier. It starts with the paint and the carpet you choose but it's also a lighter and brighter environment."

Zimney said LEED certification also adds real value to a building. "LEED buildings sell for about 9 percent more," she said. "Commercial property owners can fetch a premium if their buildings operate more efficiently. Lease prices can also be higher."

Even so, criticism of the LEED process has ranged from skepticism that the standards actually encourage energy conservation, to questions about whether an expensive certification process by a third-party group is really necessary. Many architects and construction firms specialize in green building, creating a cottage industry around the LEED process.

In an interview with PBS in 2010, world-renowned architect Frank Gehry said LEED wasn't

necessarily the best measure of a building's energy efficiency. "A lot of our clients don't apply for the LEED certification because it's complicated and in their view, they simply don't need it," he said.

Others question whether it makes sense for public entities like universities to spend taxpayers funds on LEED.

Zimney with the USGBC admits that LEED certification, a costly and paperwork-intensive process, isn't necessary for a company to enjoy the benefits of building green — an organization can build with sustainability in mind and never bother to get the official plaque.

But, she said, having the stamp of approval from USGBC can often add real value to a building when the owner wants to lease it out or sell it. "When people ask, 'Why should I pay the money to get the LEED plaque?' we tell them it makes sense if that is something that you want to be able to use in a marketing situation. They can rely on a third-party certification to prove that what the building owner is saying is true," she said.

The LEED process also provides a framework with quantifiable measures that architects and contractors can use to guide their projects, Zimney said.

Retailer Kohl's operates the largest number of LEED-certified buildings on the private side of the Business Times' rankings, with five stores in the region with Silver certifications.

A Kohl's representative declined to comment on the company's green building program, but in press materials the firm has said it intends to LEED-certify between 50 and 65 existing stores per year.

Its tri-county stores, each more than 90,000 square feet in size, feature water-efficient features, recycled building materials, on-site recycling and Energy Star-rated roofing. The company said it is focused on improving indoor air quality and water and energy efficiency at its stores, and also focuses on using green cleaning products. Many of its LEED stores generate power through rooftop solar panels, it noted.