

Health Centers Make Commitment to Green Design

CONSTRUCTION: Sustainable Environments Impact Quality of Life

By STEVE SINOVIC

When officials at La Maestra Community Health Centers started planning a new facility in the City Heights neighborhood, they had a directive for designers and construction crews: Make it as green as possible.

Not a hard request to make in a city that is increasingly seen as a green hub.

"This is a business that has made a particularly strong commitment to green design and building," said Douglas Kot, executive director of the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council's San Diego chapter.



Douglas Kot

La Maestra, which marked its "soft opening" in July at 4185 Fairmount Ave., is one of 600 active business members that belong to the chapter, an organization that unabashedly advocates, celebrates and collaborates with companies looking to be as clean and green as possible, affordability notwithstanding.

Clinic managers and board members received technical consulting services for the green building aspects of the project through the San Diego Regional Energy Office's Green Building Program. The new clinic is being designed to attain a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Gold level of certification.

Protection for Staff and Clients

Health of the work force and its clients is the first concern.

"It's important for health clinics to incorporate sustainable design elements into their facilities — not only to protect the environment, but also to provide healthy work/care environments for their employees and patients," said Zara Marselina, La Maestra's chief executive officer, who manages a staff of 165 employees.

Construction costs were nearly \$15 million, and incorporated sustainable practices in the design of the three-story structure from the start by locating the building on the site to take advantage of prevailing breezes and solar orientation. The rooftop is ringed with solar panels.

Materials designed into the project include interior finish materials with a high percentage of recycled content; products with low volatile organic compounds emissions; and Environmental Protection Agency Energy Star-rated materials and equipment. The building also features



Zygmunt Kryliak

Health care facilities such as La Maestra Community Health Centers are early adopters of the green building movement that is gaining momentum among local designers and builders.

water-conserving plumbing fixtures, and high-performance, energy-efficient mechanical and lighting systems.

The construction project manager said the sustainable design elements will do more than protect the environment: They will help lower La Maestra's maintenance costs as well.

The clinic staff treats about 150 patients a day.

Health Care Is Early Adopter

While many local businesses are seeing the connection between sustainable materials and the health of workers and visitors, the health care industry, for obvious reasons, has been an eager early adopter, said Kot, an architect by profession.

Indeed, San Diego will host the Sustainable Hospitals 2011 conference in January.

While the agenda is an ambitious one for hospitals, the overriding theme is the importance of human health as a factor in design, an issue that came to the forefront in the 1980s as a result of sick building syndrome, which results in a combination of ailments associated with an individual's reaction to a building's environment.

Kot said sick building syndrome is mainly related to poor indoor air quality. Other causes have been attributed to contaminants produced by some types of building materials and carpeting.

Hospitals aren't the only businesses going green as a way to enhance employee health. Many companies in San Diego have a number of projects under way or under consideration.

"It's a big opportunity to really raise the bar on how our business community perceives health in buildings," said Kot. "Anything that can be done to improve human health around issues like air quality makes a big difference in a company's bottom line."

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