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At 4.2 million sf, Chicago's Merchandise Mart is the largest commercial building in the U.S. and one of the biggest multistory structures in the world. And, if all goes as planned, the Mart will soon get another notable designation, the world's largest green commercial building. In June, Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., the Mart's property management firm, announced that it would pursue LEED for Existing Buildings Silver certification from the U.S. Green Building Council for the historic structure, which houses wholesale furniture and interiors showrooms, exhibit space for tradeshow like NeoCon, offices, and retail space.

"MMPI is working with Chicago-based nonprofit environmental consultant Delta Institute and Madison, Wis.-based engineer EnVise LLC on the certification process, which could be finalized as early as next month," says Myron Maurer, SVP with MMPI.

The property manager has long employed green operations and maintenance initiatives at the Mart, including the use of low-VOC cleaning products and a waste-recycling program that diverted more than 11 million pounds of waste from landfills last year, but achieving LEED-EB certification would set forth even more stringent construction and O&M policies for the 800-plus tenants that occupy the Mart. For instance, MMPI rewrote its construction standards manual to require the implementation of C&D waste recycling and low-impact construction methods to minimize dust and debris during tenant fit outs, as well as the use of low-VOC and recycled products.

"If tenants want to use something other than green products and finishes, they have to submit it to us for approval, and we'll generally help them find a solution," says Maurer, who adds that many tenants already follow their own green policies.

Haworth has been LEED-CI certified for three or four years, and other tenants are attempting to become certified. For the tenants that are new to sustainable design, MMPI offers educational programs to get their staff and preferred contractors up to speed on the green policies. MMPI also operates an on-site warehouse where tenants can purchase green products and materials, like compact fluorescent light bulbs and certified wood products.

"We get discounts because of volume, so there's price advantages in addition to the convenience factor," says Maurer.

In addition, MMPI requires the use of Green Seal-certified cleaning products and has adopted green events guidelines for tradeshow to reduce waste and educate visitors. The building's recycling program has been expanded to include batteries and light bulbs, and utility meters and control mechanisms have been installed throughout the building to improve MMPI's ability to measure and analyze energy and water consumption.

Maurer says LEED-EB certification is just the first step toward a truly green future for the Mart. By 2010, MMPI plans to reduce overall energy use by 20%. Hitting that mark will require more accurate measurement and control of energy consumption and the use of new technologies like LEDs in the showrooms and exhibit spaces.

"Lighting is by far our largest source of energy consumption, so working with these new LEDs is going to have a huge impact on our energy use," says Maurer.

Rancho Verde: A Green Industrial Park
Kristin Foster A former construction dumping site seems to be an unlikely choice for a site to build an environmentally friendly project on. Don't tell that to Christy Webber, however. In need of a larger space for her landscape design business, Webber purchased the 12.5-acre brownfield site behind Chicago's LEED Platinum Center for Green Technology and turned it into an eco-friendly industrial park. Last December, Rancho Verde became a reality, with Christy Webber Landscapes as anchor tenant.

Currently rated LEED Gold but striving for LEED Platinum, Green Town, contains numerous sustainable building innovations: a stormwater retention pond, bioswales, induction lighting on the streets, a rooftop greenhouse, and an offsite, energy-generating wind turbine. In a first for any LEED project in Chicago, the public street outside has been paved with pervious block to reduce contaminated run-off.