

Earth Forum Posts

[More than bragging rights at stake as city strives to be greenest in U.S.](#)

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[Greenwire](#): CHICAGO — This metropolis has long been dismissed as “The Second City” — big and blustery in New York’s shadow.

But when in [sustainable design](#) and in making plans big enough to “stir men’s souls,” as a famous Windy City architect once put it, Chicago aims to be second to none.

Mayor Richard Daley (D) wants to make Chicago the greenest city in the country, and his plans received a big boost this week when two of downtown’s largest buildings earned environmental certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.



The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, which is hosting its annual GreenBuild conference here, awarded LEED certification yesterday to the 4.2 million-square-foot Merchandise Mart that looms over the banks of the Chicago River.

A day earlier, Daley and former President Bill Clinton shared the stage to announce that the McCormick Place convention center, which is hosting the conference’s 20,000-plus attendees, had also received LEED certification. The light-filled complex’s new west wing features a 150,000-square-foot “[living roof](#)” and efficient heating and cooling equipment that will help lower electricity bills by 20 percent, city officials claim.

“The city has always led by example when it comes to protecting the environment,” Daley said. “Green buildings are an important part of our efforts to make Chicago the most environmentally friendly city in the country.”

LEED, which stands for Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design, is a tiered system for rating a building's environmental [sustainability](#). Owners of new and existing homes, office buildings and other structures can put their projects through USGBC's rigorous audit process that considers energy use, [recycled](#) content in construction materials, [indoor air quality](#) and dozens of other factors.

Just 30 of Chicago's thousands of buildings have earned LEED certification, but the Daley administration is making big plans to change this.

The 77-year-old Merchandise Mart — the world's largest commercial building — earned a silver rating, the third-highest LEED tier. The building's owner, Vornado Realty Trust, has developed its own [sustainable](#) construction standards, as well as [green policies](#) for interior cleaning and exterior maintenance.

Cleaning crews must use products that have been certified by the nonprofit group Green Seal. And contractors who wish to bid on jobs throughout the massive brick building must complete a LEED training seminar.

In any given year, about 700,000 square feet of the building undergoes capital improvements, trade show operations and tenant build-outs, Vornado officials note.

"We don't view this as a completed project," explained Myron Maurer, the building's senior vice president. "We have developed the tools, now we use those tools in our day-to-day operations."

Green takes green

In the coming months, the Merchandise Mart will also undergo an extensive energy retrofit through a Clinton Climate Initiative partnership.

Chicago, New York and 14 other cities will use a \$5 billion investment to replace lighting, insulation, windows and other building components to reduce the energy consumption — and associated [greenhouse gas](#) emissions.

Chicago officials are also hoping to add the 1,450-foot-tall Sears Tower, once the world's tallest building, to its list of high-profile retrofit projects, said Sadhu Johnston, the city's chief environmental officer.

The \$5 billion investment brokered by the Clinton Foundation doubled the amount of money the private sector has committed to energy retrofits, the former president said during a speech here Wednesday before more than 7,000 architects, developers and other building industry professionals.

He urged the public and private sectors to do more to reduce energy use in the built environment — the world's most [greenhouse gas](#)-intensive sector. That will take billions more in capital.

“We are just scratching the surface,” Clinton conceded. “We have no idea what we can do in reducing [greenhouse gases](#) because we just got started.”

For its part, the city plans to make green retrofit and construction projects the centerpiece of a comprehensive [climate change](#) mitigation and adaptation strategy, Johnson said.

A draft of the city’s [climate action plan](#) aims to cut [greenhouse gas](#) emissions 25 percent by 2020, using the 2000 carbon [footprint](#) as a baseline. This would require cutting the emissions of [carbon dioxide](#) and other [heat-trapping](#) gases to about 23 million metric tons annually, from about 41 million metric tons today.

Daley has created a taxing district to finance the downtown energy retrofit work. And the city has also created a program that provides \$5,000 grants to building owners who install [green](#) or reflective rooftops.

“The main thing we’re going to be focusing on is energy conservation and energy efficiency,” Johnson said.

LEED by example

With thousands of building industry professionals in town this week, Mayor Daley has dubbed Oct. 13 through Nov. 16 “green building month.” City officials are hosting tours of Chicago’s most [design](#)-forward buildings and hosting classes on solar power, [green roofs](#) and other topics.

“The bottom line is that the city can’t do this alone,” Johnson said.

But it can look forward to being No. 1 soon in terms of what’s long been an important city bragging right — having the nation’s tallest building. And in a 21st century twist, the structure would also be the world’s greenest skyscraper.

The designers of the “Chicago Spire,” which will rise along the edge of Lake Michigan in the heart of downtown’s Loop, are aiming for a gold LEED certification.

Construction crews broke ground on the 2,000-foot-tall building last summer. When tenants begin moving into the high-rise in 2011, they will be surrounded by an energy-efficient facade and 3 acres of adjacent park space that will be watered with recycled rainwater.

“The Sears Tower and Hancock Building were important symbols of architecture last century,” said Joseph Burns, managing principal with Thornton Tomasetti, the tower’s structural engineer. “We want to create something green that symbolizes the 21st century.”