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Construction Junction

University aims for sustainability with building projects

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UT is building a new standard for sustainability with its current and future construction projects.

All new buildings on campus are now expected to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards. The LEED system, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, is a nationally recognized approach to green building that follows a process of ensuring efficient energy and water use, low waste and resource conservation.

“Everything that has a crane on it has a green-building ethic surrounding it,” said UT sustainability director Jim Walker.

Students across campus can see the array of construction projects in process, ranging from the south wing of the biomedical engineering building, scheduled for completion in October, to the Belo Center for New Media, a communications school building that has been under consideration for 20 years and will be completed in spring 2012.

There are four LEED ratings: platinum, gold, silver and certified. Buildings earn points with different efficiency components, and the total score determines whether the building earns an appropriate LEED rating. Walker said UT is seeking a LEED rating of at least silver for all new buildings.

Steps toward achieving LEED ratings include the construction methods used while building and the installation of energy-efficient lighting, high-performance thermostat systems and automatic toilets, Walker said. He said these building standards allow for more durable buildings and contribute to utility-bill savings and other cost reductions. Although savings may not translate directly into tuition cuts for current students, Walker said the long-term benefits will serve students, the University and the state.

“Students may not see a financial benefit, but as an agency of the state, UT has a responsibility to be a steward of state resources it is given,” he said. “We have to consider how well the building is going to operate now and 50 years from now.”

Lily Alderman, an architectural engineering senior and chairwoman of Students for a Sustainable Campus, said these measures represent a move toward the environmental consciousness that she said is becoming increasingly important to students.

“LEED buildings are a little more expensive up front, but in the long run you save money,” Alderman said. “You’re saving on operating costs because they’re more efficient.”

The green-building program extends beyond new buildings into renovations and day-to-day maintenance, Walker said. In January 2009, UT completed a \$15.1 million upgrade of campus water and lighting components. The upgrade saves the University \$2.7 million per year in utility costs.

Bob Rawski, the UT System’s regional program manager for UT, said ingenuity in architecture and innovative projects will be a great asset as UT seeks LEED scores. He cited the Student Activities Center slated for completion in spring 2011 as a prime example.

The center will be outfitted with efficient rooftop landscaping, called “green roofs,” and rainwater harvesting.

The building, which is expected to receive a silver LEED rating, will have an auditorium, a blackbox theater, eateries, a ballroom and offices for student organizations.

“It’s going to be amazing,” Rawski said. “I’ve walked through the construction and just thought, ‘Golly, I wish I were a student.’”

The constant stream of large construction projects may be slowing down as UT starts to run out of space, said David Rey, the director of campus planning. However, he said he could not speculate about any specific projects beyond those already scheduled.

“I’ve been on campus for 25 years, and construction seems to come in waves,” Rey said. “There will be times that are slower and faster than others because we have a very diverse campus. The last two years have been fairly busy from a construction perspective.”



Walker said that with new buildings and new sustainable standards, it is necessary to develop a new campus culture centered around a commitment to the elements that make earning LEED ratings possible.

“For any green building to work, the people who occupy that building, who have offices and meetings and classes there, have to change their behavior to operate the building in the way it was designed in order to realize the benefits,” Walker said. “If you design green lighting but then leave the lights on all night, it won’t succeed.”

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