

# Grand Rapids is ahead of the game in eco-friendly living

Conservative area is showing other communities what's possible

*BY TINA LAM  
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GRAND RAPIDS -- When Mayor George Heartwell looks out his office window, he sees an unusual sight in Michigan: a skyline full of construction cranes.

The city is experiencing a building boom, and it's green. Four of the five giant new projects rising downtown are green-built.

Churchy, conservative Grand Rapids has become a visionary environmental role model and arguably Michigan's greenest city.

This rustbelt town is dotted with living green roofs and rainwater cisterns, solar panels and geothermal systems. A slick new art museum, giant YMCA and new ballet theater are all green. The city has hybrid buses and energy-saving LED bulbs in traffic lights. Heartwell plans to bring back streetcars and put up wind turbines on the city's bridges.

More than half the state's LEED-certified houses -- those built to demanding environmental standards -- are in Grand Rapids. And the city has 32 LEED-certified buildings, more per capita than any other city in the country, according to U.S. Green Building Council figures. Another 50 LEED buildings are in the pipeline.

The city gets 20% of its electricity for city buildings from renewable sources now, and Heartwell is aiming for 100% by 2020.

Yes, really, in Grand Rapids.

"We have very conservative values here, but we also have a very progressive mind-set," said Keith Winn, president of a local consulting firm that works on green projects.

Sustainability is big all over western Michigan. The three furniture giants -- Steelcase, Herman Miller and Haworth -- all have super-green headquarters and product lines.

Habitat for Humanity of Kent County builds nothing but LEED homes. Holland has the first gold-certified LEED hotel. Grand Valley State University is planning the country's first 100% green campus.

Business and government are all on board.

"Sustainability is not just putting out recycling bins and turning down the thermostat," said Matt Tueth, who teaches sustainable business at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids. "It's a core change."

Here, it's happening.

**Green city, green leaders**

"I'm a fisherman, boater, hiker," said Heartwell, explaining his environmental bent. An ordained Church of Christ minister, he quotes South American writers and Native American proverbs in speeches.

He only had been mayor for three weeks in 2003 when he announced his 20% renewable energy goal, something no other Michigan city has achieved. The state just adopted a requirement for 10% of utilities' electricity to come from renewables by 2015.

Heartwell, named one of 12 top mayors in the nation for his green initiatives by a noted expert on sustainable cities, says he hopes to bring renewable energy manufacturers to town. His city is described as "America's greenest city" in the October issue of Fast Company, a business magazine that focuses on innovation and technology.

All new city-owned buildings are built to LEED standards, and so are many private projects, including a commercial office building, a retail center and four new medical office and research buildings, Heartwell said. "Architects say that in the past, they had to convince owners to build green," he said. "Now, owners are demanding it."

People say it was a confluence of business and political leaders who actively pushed eco-friendly initiatives over the past 15 years that led to Grand Rapids' green successes. They include Heartwell; philanthropist Peter Wege, who poured money into green projects; developer Guy Bazzani, who rebuilt an entire neighborhood with green buildings, and pioneering executives at Steelcase and Herman Miller, who made their own buildings and businesses green and then spread the gospel. Academic and church leaders also have been on board.

Heartwell credits acceptance by residents, businesses and government. "Grand Rapids was ready for this," he said. "We show what's possible."

## **'This is not a fad'**

Joni Jessup walked around the footprint of her new house, piling bits of scrap metal for recycling. She pointed out the view from her back deck, a forest that holds wild turkeys and deer.

"For me, this is a very big deal," said Jessup, 58, a first-time home buyer helping to build her new Habitat for Humanity house in gritty southeast Grand Rapids.

Hers is one of 16 new green Habitat homes being built on a cul-de-sac.

"People are seeing a need to live differently now," she said. "It's good."

Her home includes features such as nontoxic paint, super-efficient Energy Star appliances, compact fluorescent lightbulbs, an insulated foundation, water-efficient toilets, an air exchange system, energy-efficient windows and insulation made of ground-up newspapers. Most construction materials were recycled.

"This is not a fad," said Pam Doty-Nation, director of Habitat for Humanity of Kent County. The local Habitat built the country's first LEED Habitat house and now builds nothing else.

"People think it's more expensive, but we've demonstrated it's not," she said. LEED requirements add \$6,000 to \$8,000 on a \$100,000 house, but owners save up to \$2,000 more per year on energy costs. It also boosts resale value.

"If we can do this, anybody can," she said.

## **Eco-friendly eatery**

At the Green Well Gastro Pub in Grand Rapids' hip Cherry Street neighborhood, north of downtown, a richly hued 28-foot plank of cherrywood graces the bar. It's a centerpiece of the restaurant, which opened a little over a year ago as the first LEED-certified restaurant in Michigan.

The plank is from a tree that fell in the owner's yard. Beneath the wood top are panels made from bamboo and recycled resin. The chairs and wine rack are locally made, without stains or dyes. Tables are made of untreated wood and metal. The shiny gray floor is concrete mixed with ash. The lights have energy-saving bulbs. The men's bathroom has waterless urinals. The fabric in the booths is made from 100% recycled material.

The restaurant even makes its own sparkling water, rather than shipping in a faraway bottled brand, said manager Rob Tamburello.

"We're doing this because we believe in it," he said. "It's a personal as well as a business philosophy."

Tamburello and other employees ride scooters or walk to work.

The restaurant produces little trash, recycling nearly everything. Rainwater goes into a reservoir and is used to irrigate a neighbor's extensive gardens. The parking lot is a special porous concrete that absorbs runoff.

And if someone needs a ride home from the pub at the end of the night, the restaurant will call -- what else? -- a hybrid taxi.

## **An early example**

Even from the outside, Herman Miller's GreenHouse factory and offices in Holland look like no other corporate headquarters. Instead of a manicured lawn, a prairie with fuzzy tufts of grasses and mounds of wildflowers surrounds a graceful steel and brick building with a curved glass roof.

Inside, in a coffee bar with bamboo floors, guests get lattes and small jars of honey bottled on the premises. Herman Miller employs a beekeeper to tend the 600,000 bees it brought in a few years ago.

There's a farmers market on Tuesdays and a basketball court under the glass roof. In the café-like dining room, the floor covering is recycled tires. Recycling bins are everywhere.

The GreenHouse was ahead of its time. Built in 1995, it was one of three pioneering buildings the U.S. Green Building Council used to create the national LEED standards.

In 1953, company founder D.J. DePree declared his company would be a good steward of the environment. That principle has guided the firm ever since. "He put the bar there for us," said Paul Murray, director of environmental health and safety. "It takes leadership."

Murray said the company's sustainability helps the bottom line. "People choose us for our green story," he said. "We think it boosts sales."

The firm has set its own environmental goals to reach by 2020: 100% renewable electricity from sources such as wind (it's now at 63%), zero hazardous waste, zero waste sent to landfills, zero air emissions from its factories and wood waste boiler, and making all buildings it owns or leases LEED-certified. It sent 41 million pounds of waste to landfills in 1988; it sent fewer than 4 million last year, despite the company's size doubling.

It buys wind power from a wind farm in the Thumb. It runs some buildings on steam from a biomass boiler that burns wood scraps, which used to go to a landfill. The firm is working on turning the ash into fertilizer.

"We never rest," Murray said.

## **It's about 'simplicity, beauty'**

The reflecting pool just outside Grand Rapids' new art museum is not just pretty to look at, it's part of a system that stores rainwater collected from the roof and reuses it throughout the museum. The water is stored in cisterns and recirculated in the pool, a waterfall, toilets and outdoor landscaping.

That's just one of its striking green features. The roof also is painted white to deflect the sun on hot days. Three tower-like skylights sit atop the building, gathering light and distributing it throughout the building through a set of louvers. Carpeting is made from recycled pop bottles. Tall windows everywhere, uncommon in museums, bring in daylight, while low-energy bulbs are used in darker areas.

Energy wheels in the basement suck in fresh air and circulate it through vents, a passive form of air-conditioning. The wood comes from sustainable sources, such as fast-growing white oak forests.

The push for a green building came from Peter Wege, son of the founder of the Steelcase Corp., whose foundation gave the first \$20 million for the \$75-million building with the stipulation that it be green.

"This is all about simplicity, beauty and doing good for the planet," said Celeste Adams, its director.

## **'A great place to live'**

So, do regular folks care that they live in a green city?

"I think people do care," said Zenobia Perry, 52, a server at a downtown hotel. "I hear them talking about these things every day on the bus. They're concerned about clean water, clean air. I want that for my grandkids."

Shannon VanNoy, 35, moved to the area from Canada a decade ago.

"This is a really conservative place, and you tend to think of green as something progressive," she said. "But it makes it a great place to live."

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