

Chesapeake Conservation Landscaping Council's  
3<sup>rd</sup> **Turning a New Leaf** Conference  
Friday, December 4, 2009  
George Washington University, Washington, DC

**TRACK A: SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE DESIGN: MAKING BEAUTIFUL PRACTICAL**  
**Session A1. *Sustainable Sites Initiative and the Design Process***  
**Nancy Somerville, President and CEO, ASLA**

The Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI) is a partnership between ASLA, the US Botanic Garden and the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center to create the first voluntary system to evaluate sustainable landscape design, construction, and maintenance. The US Green Building Council is lending its support to this project and anticipates incorporating the Initiative metrics into future versions of LEED. The Initiative's primary goal is to create guidelines, benchmarks and a rating system to guide designed landscapes toward ecological sustainability.

Why this new effort when LEED already exists? Although LEED has done an enormous amount to push the public understanding for buildings, they only begin to address sustainability for the site and landscape. Also, you cannot receive LEED certification for landscapes that do not surround a building. The US Green Building Council behind LEED is supportive of the effort and sees the ASLA as filling a gap with the Sustainable Sites Initiative. In fact, many of the metrics in SSI are based on LEED system guidelines.

Why educate professionals involved with green industries? Things that are "green" are not necessarily sustainable. Not all outdoor practices are necessarily good for the environment. Some statistics argue the point. Although 98% of adults care about the environment in terms of energy-saving or sustainable practices, only 58% use at least one sustainable practice in their yards or gardens. That figure drops when you look at garden-owner behavior more closely. Only 11-15% of garden owners plant only natives or practice water-wise gardening.

SSI is composed of 51 credits and 15 prerequisites. The credits cover areas similar to the CCLC's ***Conservation Landscaping Guidelines: The Eight Essential Elements of Conservation Landscaping***. The SSI Framework looks at ecosystem services – what does a natural landscape with no human intervention provide to the ecosystem – to develop its guidelines for designed landscapes:

- regulates global and local climate
- regulates water supply
- controls erosion
- mitigates against hazard
- provides food

- provides refuge and habitat
- contains cultural, educational and aesthetic values
- treats and re-uses decomposed waste

The LEED certification has been effective because it provides a way to show that a building is certified, encouraging positive competition. But SSI will also create a body of knowledge that can be applied broadly outside of certification process.

SSI plans to

1. Enrich LEED metrics when appropriate
2. Create a separate Sustainable Sites certification system
3. Develop Guidelines available for use without certification

*Guidelines and Performance Benchmarks 2009* report is available for download along with a shorter document *The Case for Sustainable Landscapes* on the SSI website: <http://www.sustainable-sites.org/report/> A call for Pilot Projects will be open until February 15 and will attempt to rate projects that are already in process for use as examples and to revise analysis. The Pilot Project Phase lasts for two years. After public comment, a Reference Guide will be published with the target date of 2012.

## Q & A

*Are there any professional requirements for the pilot project team members?*

No.

*Will SSI certify these projects?*

Yes. All pilot projects will receive certification. We are talking about getting the certification process done by GBCI which is the group who certifies LEED projects.

*Will SSI guidelines eventually be incorporated into LEED?*

While the USBGC has been a terrific partner, it would take member approval to incorporate SSI into LEED. So, that is not a done deal.

*Do we have legislative changes making sustainable guidelines mandatory? For example, will SSI guidelines be incorporated into building codes rather than just being a voluntary accreditation system?*

The International Codes Council is working on a green building code for Green Buildings and they do communicate with the ASLA and the EPA. Alternatively, the ASLA is working on federal legislation directly to develop policies within federal government that could serve as a model for green building and now sustainable sites.

*How much do you know about creating economic incentives for people to do this?*

ASLA is trying to collect that data, although we do not have a thorough library of where incentives are available. So, we are not there yet.

*What have you done to incorporate economic payback into the argument?*

SSI discusses economic benefits of sustainability in its shorter publication: *The Case for Sustainable Landscapes*. We continue to gather that kind of data from federal and university-based research.

[Summary prepared by Divya Kumar]