

The Towering Heights of Green Building

FROM BEPAnews: *This interview of a leading green building expert touches on the importance of building energy performance benchmarking resources. Learn more about best practices in building energy and sustainability performance benchmarking . . .*

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“Key Steps to Monetizing Building Energy Portfolio Energy Savings Opportunities”



Long before he became the bleeding edge of the green building industry, [David Borchardt](#), the Chief Sustainability Officer at Rockville, MD-based [Tower Companies](#), earned his spurs cleaning up many of the most polluted Cold War weapons sites in the United States.

Now, as the master of green ceremonies at Tower, Borchardt is responsible for making 4.5 million square feet of office buildings, 1,400 apartments and a clutch of commercial retail properties and lifestyle centers within the [Washington](#) D.C. area sustainable. That is a heap of human impact to mitigate and Borchardt has borne its burden with aplomb. [Clean Beta](#) recently had an opportunity to ask Borchardt a few questions about emerging trends in the green buildings space.

Clean Beta: What makes a building “green”?

Borchardt: Let’s start with what buildings are not green. Dumb buildings are not green. Non-profitable buildings are not green. And finally, buildings that harm people or the planet are not green. “Green” buildings are controlled at granular levels and operated in real time, which is why they perform better environmentally and economically. Through radical resource efficiency, sustainable buildings are less harmful to the environment, more profitable for the owner and deliver demonstrably superior services to occupants. At Tower, these are not “green” metrics – they are the bottom line.

Clean Beta: All politics is local. Is the same true for the “built environment”?

Borchardt: The three rules of real estate are: location, location, location. Washington D.C. is a leader in green buildings and most local developers have adopted green practices as a result of market forces. Market leaders anticipate where the market will be tomorrow. The Tower Companies championed the business case for [green buildings](#) before doing so became a market mandate. We constructed some of the first green buildings in Washington D.C. market. We also built the nation’s first multifamily green building. By “greening” building operations, Tower has made our buildings more competitive in the market.

Clean Beta: Many experts have called for a national asset rating standard for comparing energy use in commercial buildings. Would this be good for green?

Borchardt: The establishment of a fixed benchmark is something that has been floating around for a few years. One reason why is because the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Energy Star](#) standard is a moving target. Energy Star, which allows owners to evaluate the energy performance of their building over time, relies on data that is nearly a decade old and is overdue for replacement. Once that database is replaced buildings currently Energy Star labeled will no longer meet the standards. Establishment of a uniform standard would be good for the nation since you can’t manage what you don’t measure. The ability to measure enables more cost-effective investments and more substantial cost reductions.

In the meantime, there are several great benchmarks available that allow building owners to make their building “green.” The USGBC’s [Leadership](#) in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is one benchmark that the Tower Companies uses to make their buildings “green.” [ASHRAE’s Building Energy Quotient](#) is also great standard. It was developed in the European Union, but I am not sure if U.S. markets are ready for this type of standard since it might be seen as a government mandate.

Clean Beta: Explain the economics of a green building. What is the cost? What are the benefits? What is the right balance between the two?

Borchardt: There is no additional cost to design and build a green building. If there are extra costs, it is because the firms involved are doing it wrong. Many jurisdictions have mandated minimum green standards and incorporating those standards should not cost a building owner anything if their design and construction teams understand what is required. In Washington D.C.’s commercial office market, “green” is an expected standard and it is part of the cost of doing business. The benefit to a building owner is that a green building can have lower costs and there are many studies that show an improvement in building occupant productivity. The key for building owners is to invest in green features that have a return by lowering operating costs.

Clean Beta: When we finish replacing old light bulbs and dirty boilers, what will be the next big thing in green buildings?

Borchardt: What comes next? That is the question we try answer every day. We are passed the point where replacing light bulbs is enough to justify labeling a building “green.” We should be asking more of ourselves than that. The Tower Companies certainly is.