

# Willis Building finds growth in green direction

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STOIANOWSKI

Willis Building Co., a construction company in Saline founded in 1966, has inked a contract for its second green-certified project, signaling the expansion of the well-established builder into the relatively new market of environmen-

tally friendly construction.

Project manager Ryan Stoianowski said work should begin this month on the redevelopment of four connected buildings in downtown Coldwater in Branch County, including the old Kerr Hardware Building. The buildings date back to 1887.

He said building to the standards of the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design or LEED standards is a different direction for the well-established company, but it's also a great opportunity.

"It's an expansion of our core business, but we're delighted that we've positioned ourselves in a way to be able to service our customers who have seen the benefit of green building," said Stoianowski, who is the third generation of his family to operate Willis.

Stoianowski earned LEED accreditation six months ago, and it was through chairing a committee of the USBGC on emerging green buildings that he landed the Coldwa-

ter job. In fact, he said, the developer called him, not vice versa.

"I was contacted about the Coldwater project," he said. "There's a market out there. It's not so much us trying to create a market, but being able to serve those who have already made the commitment."

It's a commitment that more builders and corporations in general are making, according to University of Michigan professor Andy Hoffman, assistant director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise.

"People are turning more and more toward green construction as something both economically attractive and socially desirable," he said.

The construction industry, however, is sometimes slow to change, he said.

"Unfortunately, in the construction industry, there's a lot of inertia," Hoffman said.

He predicted a sharp increase in interest and activity in green building, with new building technologies hitting the market being a large contributing factor.

"Companies doing it right now get an additional benefit in that they can differentiate themselves in the market," Hoffman said.

Joe O'Neal of O'Neal Construction in Ann Arbor agreed that the construction industry is often slow to change. Increased costs are a factor, as well as the desire of project owners to go green – or the lack thereof.

"We follow what (owners) can afford to do," O'Neal said. "Not everybody can afford to go all the way with green. What is really important is that we try to be as green as we can be. We clearly throw a lot of stuff

away that we don't have to."

O'Neal's company has done one LEED project, and has an employee currently going through LEED training. He said being able to build a green project is a good way to distinguish a company in the marketplace.

"If an owner wants to make a LEED certified building, we're prepared to do what's necessary," he said.

He added that the administrative requirements for LEED could use some streamlining.

In the Coldwater project, Stoianowski said, the goal will be to re-use as much of the existing material as possible, and to use locally generated material to cut down on transportation costs. Energy-efficient lighting and a green roof – termed an "urban retreat" by Stoianowski, which would be accessible by the public – are also parts of the plan.

Willis' first LEED certified project is for Eden Foods in Clinton, a project that is halfway done (*Ann Arbor Business Review*, March 27-April 2).

Stoianowski said the movement toward green building is not just a trend – it's more like a "paradigm shift."

"It's not just environmentalists any more," Stoianowski said. "It's not just social consciousness ... Economically it makes sense. The cost of energy isn't going anywhere."

"Now we feel like we're positioning ourselves really well," he added.

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