

Another Arrow in the Quiver: Local Green Materials

Green buildings, green building materials, environmentally preferable purchasing policies, and a green materials database?

by Brian Yeoman

Sourcing is a recurring and maddening issue continually facing our profession. Finding “green materials” and their vendors has been a particularly acute challenge. Long ago, I found this to be a frustrating barrier for institutions trying to purchase more environmentally responsible goods. And it has frustrated me for years.

When the EPA invented the concept of environmentally preferable purchasing (EPP) contracts, my hopes were raised. The EPA has been trying to help alleviate this problem. Unfortunately, their assistance has been longer on promise than on delivery. The lack of a reliable database or listing of nationally available green products was only a part of the problem. Locally, there was an even wider separation between the accountability for sourcing and the availability (accessibility) of vendors, never mind affordabil-

ity. If environmentally preferable purchasing was going to thrive, data for public utilization was a must-have first step. Doing something about the lack of information has been a crucial matter.

Green practices of all types have suffered from a lack of data, yet green building practices and concepts are proliferating. More importantly, the public and higher education institutions have incurred increased health risks, energy costs, and maintenance costs because this data isn’t readily available. If more environmentally responsible buildings are the goal, the data for designing, building, and operating the resultant structures must be available to the design professionals, construction contractors, physical plant workers, and the procurement professionals who support the buildings’ creations, operations, and maintenance. Perhaps more importantly, it should be available to the public as well.

Frustrated that I could find no local EPP database, the pressure to act became intense and I set about to create our own. Without data, the myths and the mystique of

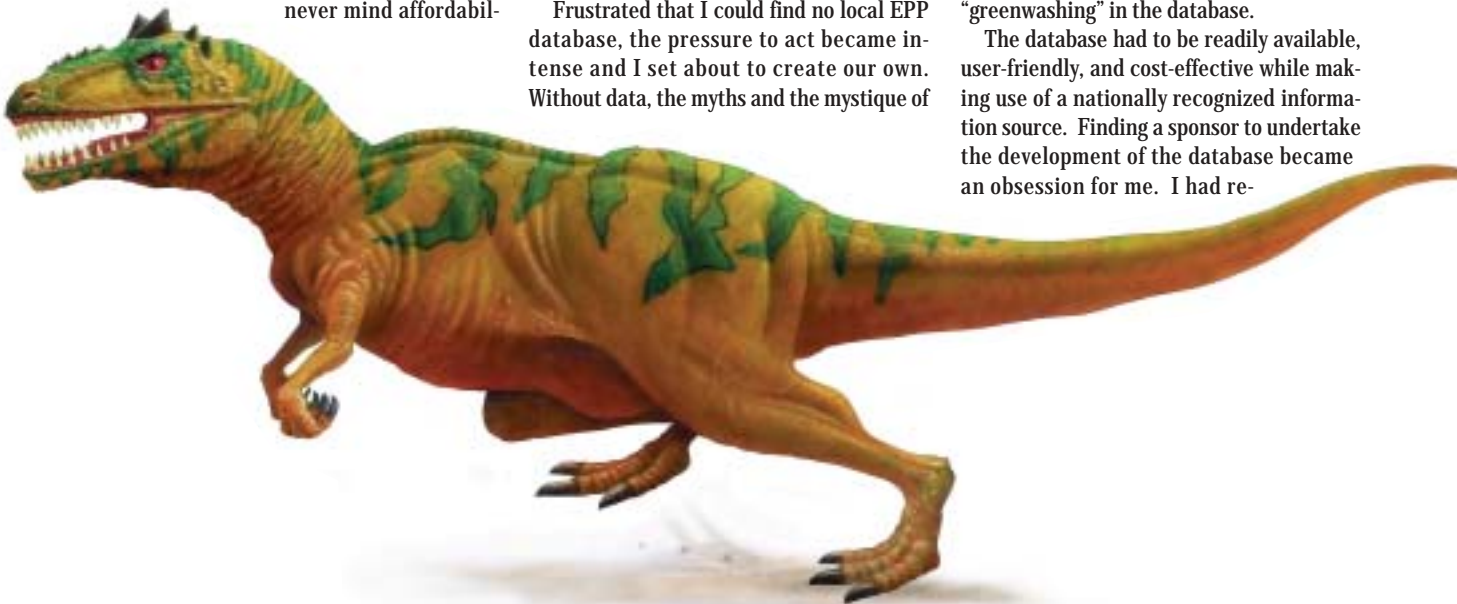
green buildings and green materials would continue to live on as myths.

It is not that the products do not exist, but there is no organized presentation of those products to the public or the professions. On top of that and in spite of the benefit to all involved, the professions themselves did not share whatever information they each had gained through experience! Instead, they held on to it, utilizing their knowledge as a form of competitive advantage.

There was a reasonable base of national data and that provided some hope for a starting position. The key was to create a local database that was meaningful to buyers, designers, contractors, and the public. Armed with an idea and committed to resolving this longstanding problem, the search was begun to find a sponsor.

Clearly, to be useful, the database would have to identify sources of locally available green materials and marry them with data provided by a credible national source. Absent this critical credibility, the database would be predicated either upon one person’s interpretation of what was “green” or upon the marketing claims of vendors. Absent this critical credibility, we likely would forever suffer the consequences of “greenwashing” in the database.

The database had to be readily available, user-friendly, and cost-effective while making use of a nationally recognized information source. Finding a sponsor to undertake the development of the database became an obsession for me. I had re-



Database

cently left a large University system and the quest for a sponsor had seemed to expire. But another of life's doors opened when I signed on with the Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC), a not-for-profit organization whose mission – for more than twenty years – had been focused on the notion of sustainable development. I was at HARC less than 30 days when I sought to make the proposal breathe life again. Leadership listened to the proposal, saw the local green materials database as a prime opportunity to build brand image concerning green building methods and systems, and authorized a project to create the database.

The initial decision was to find and confirm a credible national green materials resource database. After conducting the research, the BuildingGreen organization's database was selected. BuildingGreen is the publisher of the GreenSpec publication and the monthly periodical known as *The Environmental Building News* (EBN). HARC sought to create a partnership, and BuildingGreen, a market leader with a long and distinguished history, was interested. Happily, a mutually beneficial agreement emerged.

The concept behind the database is the utilization of the GreenSpec structure as the source for manufacturer data and for the validation of most of the local data. This immediately resulted in some 1,800 items populating the database. It was critical within the database to differentiate between "commercial/institutional" and "residential," as there is an interface that allows users not to have to fight through lots of nonapplicable data. This became a design specification.

For ease of use, the logic used to access the data needed to be easily recognizable. We settled upon using the nomenclature of the 16 divisions of the Construction Specifications Institute (CSI) standards for the commercial/institutional portion of the database and common-language English as

the standard for the residential. This was done because the manufacturers in the BuildingGreen database utilize this key, and it is widely employed in the design and construction industries. Each entry is validated by HARC before posting to the database.

What makes the database unique is the addition of local supplier(s) of the manufacturer-tested products. HARC has created the software and the process to make each local record unique and, in the instance of the current database, locally focused on Houston. It could just as well be Miami or Boston. HARC researches the manufacturers local supply chain and enters the data required to make the record unique in the database. The result is an amazingly simple and friendly resource for the entire world to share.

The database is made available under the Web site name of localgreenmaterials.com, .org, and .net. When a user accesses the site, the database displays the national green material data as well as the "unique" green products and suppliers for the Houston area. The database details why the product is "green." If the user enters his/her zip code and queries any product classification and/or manufacturer's product, the database will provide the nearest location of the vendor who handles the product. Vendor contact information is the typical name, address, phone, e-mail, and Web site. A Google

map can also be called up and printed. If there is no local vendor, the search will result with the manufacturer and the manufacturer's data. The database does this for both commercial/institutional items as well as residential.

The database is in its infancy. HARC intends to add Greenguard as well as GreenSeal items when the resources exist to do so. HARC also has plans to work with the EPA to provide the EPP contract vendors and their information. The database is refreshed and reconciled monthly by BuildingGreen and HARC personnel.

The goal for the project was first to provide data that is readily available and usable by everyone who needs it – from the homeowner to the purchasing professional, to the subcontractor, to the owner – and to transform the green building marketplace in Houston area. It is a good tool at an unbeatable price. I am very proud to share it with all of my purchasing colleagues. Log on at localgreenmaterials.org and let me hear from you. There is no fee, and it is planned that there never will be.

Donella Meadows, a friend, said, "The scarcest resource is not oil, metals, clean air, capital, labor, or technology. It is our willingness to listen to each other and learn from each other, and to seek the truth rather than seek to be right." Sharing is a strength, not a weakness. Remember that you too can do great things!!!



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