

SERF is trying to be a leader

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Integrated Architecture Executive Vice President Mike Corby characterized SERF as a fresh entry into the green-building field, and one that concentrates more on maintaining a green designation than on just granting that type of environmental accreditation.

"It's a continual designation that you have to maintain, and you have to meet their standards on an annual basis," said Corby.

"One of the criticisms you get of LEED is you get the designation and then you can do whatever you want with your building, whether it's good or bad. And I think SERF is kind of saying, 'While we're not going to be maybe as stringent up front, we're still going to have a review process to get a designation, but we're going to be more interested in seeing how you continue to live and operate sustainably.'"

SERF is an acronym for the Society of Environmentally Responsible Facilities. Its members are property owners and professionals who are interested in certifying and promoting environmentally responsible commercial buildings and homes. SERF was founded in April 2010 and launched its public campaign the following October.

"During the past nine months, our SERF certification program has been gaining traction throughout Michigan and elsewhere. To date, SERF has 32 buildings certified in five states and more than a dozen certifications in process, including all seven buildings contained in Cooley Law School's four campuses across the state," said SERF President Joe Maguire in an e-mail to the Business Journal.

"Several notable buildings in Michigan are SERF certified, including the Lansing Center, Lamar Construction's iconic, cantilevered

headquarters in Hudsonville, and the Creekside Commons Office Park in Portage," Maguire added.

Other SERF-certified buildings are in Florida, Texas and North Carolina.

"They're really focused on developing relationships right now with institutions and corporations that are kind of like mine. They've got an interesting tie-in with MSU, and I think they've recently got some discussions going with Haworth and other corporations," said Corby.

SERF is based in East Lansing, which is also home to Maguire Properties. The organization is teaming with others in the industry to build a demonstration and education office building near Michigan State University that plans to feature the latest in green technology, systems and products. Maguire said SERF has a pair of "high-level" partners in the project and that more information would be coming in the next few months. Integrated Architecture designed the SERF building.

Maguire said SERF is interested in making environmental certification affordable and accessible.

"While our self-guided process is more streamlined and cost-effective when compared to other certification programs, the criteria is extremely thorough. SERF evaluates a building based on 20 core aspects of environmental sustainability, including HVAC, building automation system (BAS), structure, lighting, appliances, landscaping, water usage, recycling, solid-waste management, green cleaning, exterior lighting, indoor air quality, and more," he said.

Like the U.S. Green Building Council, which offers a series of LEED designations, Maguire said SERF also is dedicated to advancing environmental sustainability and certification. But Maguire

pointed out that SERF takes a different approach than USGBC, one that he said is more holistic and operationally tuned.

"We want to equip property owners and managers with guidelines and expectations for ongoing green management well after they've pursued certification. Additionally, because our approach is substantially more streamlined, building owners and managers can pursue and achieve SERF certification in a couple of months at a reasonable cost," he said.

Those interested in learning more about SERF can go to serf.green.org. Certification applications for office, commercial, institutional and residential buildings are available online, as is the application to become a professional associate of SERF. The certification fees are spelled out in the applications and vary based on a structure's size.

"They're not trying to be LEED, but they're trying to fill a niche with projects that, I think, are not interested in the kind of upfront cost that you get with LEED. But, again, they want to focus more on a continual maintenance of sustainable strategies than whether a building is LEED certifiable. They're a little less prescriptive and a little more focused on maintenance," said Corby of SERF.

"I think LEED is becoming kind of a normal process here. I don't think it's a negative thing; I think it's a positive thing that says it has found its place. It's staying relevant and people are using it. It comes up in virtually every project we do, and I'd say a large percentage of them pursue it," he added.

"The nice thing about SERF is it's easy to digest initially. If you're looking at the dollars — which everybody does, it seems, when they're looking at any kind of rating system — it's a little easier to say, 'That's worth pursuing.'"