

It Pays to be Green

EDUCATION AND EXPERTISE CAN HELP LOCAL COMPANIES EMBRACE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY CONCEPTS.



COURTESY OF GATES

Natural resources: An artist's rendering of the new "green" Interpretive Center at Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve.

DO YOU RECYCLE? USE motion-sensor lighting? Opt for native vegetation in your landscaping? Then you've already "gone green." No longer a vague concept of the future, green building is changing the shape of the construction industry and rapidly gaining momentum in Southwest Florida.

A green, or sustainable, building is designed, built, renovated, operated or reused to meet certain objectives, such as protecting occupant health; improving employee productivity; using energy, water and other resources more efficiently; and reducing the overall impact to the environment.

Our company, GATES, recently completed The Interpretive Center at Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve in south Fort Myers. The project was constructed to meet the national standard of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and is awaiting formal certification. The center is expected to achieve Silver LEED, making it the first LEED commercial project in Lee and Collier counties. We were fortunate enough to have been chosen by Lee County officials to construct the center, and we applaud them

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and the Friends of Six Mile Cypress Slough for making it happen.

Some of the techniques GATES implemented include the use of recycled and organic materials. The center’s external deck and railings are made of a substance that resembles wood but is actually a composite of recycled products including plastic grocery bags and sawdust. Fifty-one percent of the original site was preserved, and special care was taken not to disturb the surrounding habitat. During construction, 179 tons of material was diverted from the landfill, mostly through recycling.

As with anything new, the introduction of the LEED standard of construction to Southwest Florida was met with some resistance. GATES is now a 15-year-old company, active in both the U.S. Green Building Council and the Florida Green Building Coalition, and expanding into the Republic of Panama. Even our own team had some initial reluctance. But by educating ourselves and our subcontractors, we were able to take the fear out of the unknown. Having successfully gone through the process, our team embraced the concept and now has a passion and excitement for these types of projects. It was a tremendous learning experience for us.

There is a Native American quote that we actually use in our ads now to promote green building: “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” As someone who has always loved the outdoors, and as a father, I can appreciate that.

Additionally, it makes good sense to build responsibly, and it can result in savings throughout the life cycle of the building.

While green building can be as extensive as the Interpretive Center project, it can also be as simple as providing bike racks to encourage people to use alternate transportation. We have applied varying levels of green aspects to many of our projects over the years. In fact, many people don’t realize they have some of these techniques in their own homes.

Tinted windows, recycling, compact florescent light bulbs, a well-balanced HVAC system, Energy Star appliances and low-flow fixtures all represent environmentally friendly building components. Other green components may include the use of metal roofs for heat reduction, rainwater harvesting, waterless urinals, spray foam insulation and clerestory windows for day lighting.

We have seen a recent surge in interest among many of our clients and associates in exploring some level of green for their future projects. The bottom line is always a key factor, but there are many ways to implement green aspects without driving up the cost. We can build to whatever level of “green” that our clients wish to embrace. We can offer ideas on green aspects or energy savings, or we can take the project all the way to LEED certification.

Studies show that the cost per square foot for building green actually falls within the range for traditional buildings. An upfront investment of 2 percent to 8 percent in green building design, on average, results in life-cycle savings of 20 percent of the total construction costs. That’s more than 10 times the initial investment and, on average, energy savings of 20 percent to 45 percent per year. For example, water use reduction techniques at The Interpretive Center will save about 34,000 gallons of water per year.

As green building catches on in Southwest Florida, you will see more firms educating themselves and their staffs accordingly. That is great news for the community. Competition makes us all stronger, and we welcome it. We also welcome anyone



Eagle-eye view: An aerial photograph of the Interpretive Center at Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve shows how few trees were removed during construction.

interested in implementing green aspects on their next project to come and tour The Interpretive Center. It really is a wonderful facility, and it is open to the public. 🌳