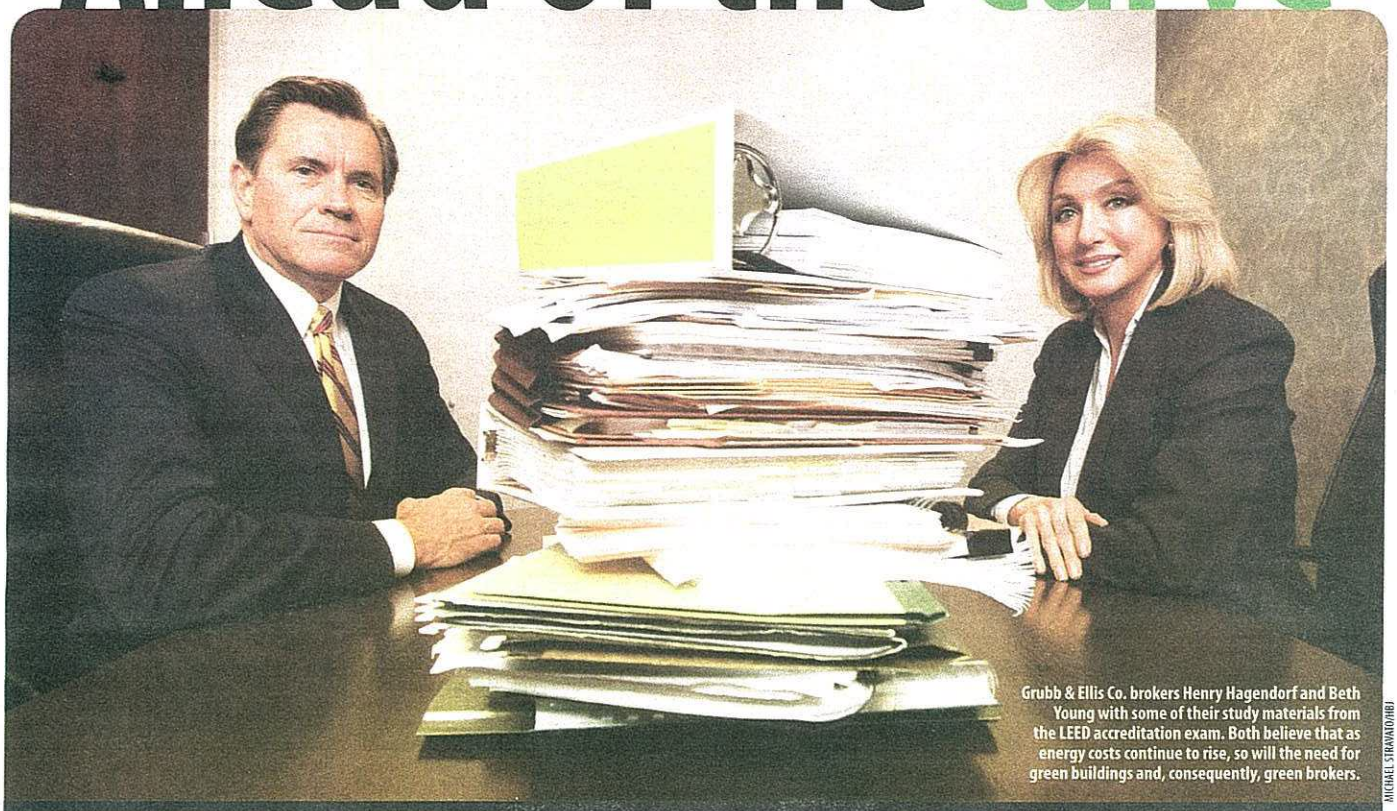
BY C. RICHARD COTTON | SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Ahead of the curve



Grubb & Ellis Co. brokers Henry Hagendorf and Beth Young with some of their study materials from the LEED accreditation exam. Both believe that as energy costs continue to rise, so will the need for green buildings and, consequently, green brokers.

MICHAEL STRAVATO/HBJ

Time-consuming accreditation process positions brokers as sustainable building experts

After attending their first LEED-accreditation class with about 100 other brokers, Houston real estate professionals Beth Young and Henry Hagendorf began to see their classmates dwindle.

Each week, fewer and fewer of the original 100 students returned, Young said.

About 300 study hours after that first day, the Grubb & Ellis Co. brokers were the only two who sat for the final accreditation test.

"Very few brokers have the LEED AP, because so much goes into getting certified," Young said. "One thing that made me feel great is running into an engineer who had failed the test three times."

Young also estimates she spent $300 on books and "$50 here and $50 there" for online practice tests.

Real estate professionals who complete the certification program may be ahead of their time: LEED-certified buildings don't yet proliferate the Houston landscape. But Hagendorf and Young believe as the cost of energy to heat and cool interior spaces continues to rise, so will the need for green buildings and — consequently — green brokers.

> "They say, 'OK, we got the plaque, now what?' They get the plaque and go back to the old ways."
>
> MORRIS CHEN | TRANSWESTERN

"I believe we're ahead of the curve," Hagendorf said.

LEED-certified buildings are designed and built — or renovated, in the case of an existing structure — to consume as little energy as possible, shrinking a structure's carbon footprint. Advantages include lower energy and maintenance costs, though the initial cost can be higher than conventional construction.

THE PAYOFF

Has Hagendorf and Young's LEED status increased their firm's bottom line?

No, says Hagendorf — but it's less about an immediate payoff and more about positioning themselves for future demand.

Their company specializes in office buildings and medical clinics. While LEED is quickly becoming a buzzword in the industry, Hagendorf said, buildings built to LEED standards remain a new concept.

Thus far, market demand for the energy- and resource-conserving structures isn't through the roof, he said, but this will change as time marches on.

Both Hagendorf and Young say their accreditation has

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Room for renewables?
Local companies face transition with optimism
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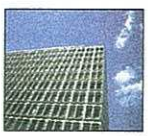

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More building owners opting for LEED certifications
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Green 101
Energy-efficiency expert: Quick fixes can make office buildings more green
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COULD *YOU* PASS?

HERE ARE TWO SAMPLE QUESTIONS STUDIED BY LEED ACCREDITED BROKERS:

1. A firm is designing a Midwestern law office building with 15,000 square feet of perimeter private offices, 30,000 square feet of non-perimeter open offices and 10,000 square feet of non-regularly occupied spaces. Occupant comfort is a primary goal of the design criteria. To meet this goal, the design must meet criteria relating to ASHRAE 55, which refers to thermal comfort. Complying with ASHRAE 55 standards, however, may interfere with one of the following LEED-NC credits. Which one?

   [A] EQ Credit 6.1, Controllability of Systems: Lighting
   [B] EQ Credit 4.1, Low-Emitting Materials: Adhesives and Sealants
   [C] EQ Credit 5, Measurement and Verification
   [D] EA Credit 1, Optimize Energy Performance

Answer: D. EA Credit 1, Optimize Energy Performance
ASHRAE 55 requires that occupied spaces that are mechanically heated and cooled must meet specific temperature and humidity conditions. Conditioning the air provides comfort, but it also increases energy consumption. The examinee must be aware of the synergies and trade-offs in applying green building strategies to the LEED rating system. This question represents a trade-off where occupant comfort is given higher priority than optimizing energy performance.

2. A new headquarters building for a small bank is being constructed in the southwest United States. The design team is considering a roof with high emissivity. Emissivity is defined as the:

   [A] ratio of reflected solar energy to incoming solar energy
   [B] ability of a material to shed infrared radiation or heat
   [C] ratio of transmitted light to the total incident of light
   [D] Ratio of interior luminance at a given plane to exterior light

Answer: B. USGBC references emissivity in SS Credit 7.2, Heat Island Effect: Roof. Emissivity is used to determine whether or not roofing materials comply with SS Credit 7.2

LEED

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initiated relationships with developers of LEED buildings. It also gets their names in front of owners who, as they market their properties, want brokers who are knowledgeable about complex LEED guidelines.

Young is quick to admit that becoming familiar with these guidelines and regulations can be a struggle.

"I took the book home and practically memorized it," she said.

Dozens of specialties, including property management, mechanical engineering and custodial-maintenance, can be earned in the LEED specialty program.

COSTS

Those who seek to become LEED accredited professionals don't invest only time. They also must come up with a little green of their own.

Companies that are members of the U.S. Green Building Council pay lower exam fees, said Beth Holst, vice president of credentialing at USGBC. After a $100 application fee, candidates of member companies pay $300, while nonmembers pay $450.

A less technical certification, LEED Green Associate, costs less and, according to the Green Building Council's explanation of the certification, "is intended for professionals who want to demonstrate green building expertise in non-technical fields of practice."

The application fee is $50, and members pay $150 for the test. Nonmembers pay $200.

"A lot of commercial real estate people are taking that exam," Holst said of the abbreviated version. "They are working with architects and engineers, so they need to have knowledge of green building."

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

Morris Chen, general manager at Transwestern in Houston, earned his AP accreditation in late 2007 — before the test was made tougher in 2008.

At that time, he served as property manager for a building that went through LEED certification. That building, now known as St. James Place, had received a high rating from the Energy Star program, another energy-use measuring system. The decision to seek LEED certification followed, Chen said.

"We pretty much had all the prerequisites," he said.

As the building was going through renovations to meet the LEED compliance process, Chen decided to follow along on his own personal LEED AP quest.

"It was part of my job at that time, so I was already studying the technical books," he said.

Being in the property management business, Chen said he does see a need for LEED AP property managers. Whether developers and owners recognize that need is yet to be fully realized.

"To me, the difficult part is how to maintain the building after gaining LEED certification," said Chen.

LEED buildings must be recertified every five years, and sometimes have not been maintained to USGBC standards, he explained.

Those requirements range from the initial construction to ongoing practices, such as maintaining energy conservation plans and recycling materials used in operating the occupants' businesses.

"They say, 'OK, we got the plaque, now what?' " Chen said. "They get the plaque and go back to the old ways.

"Someone has to manage all that, and that's where I come in." ■

C. RICHARD COTTON is a freelance writer.