

Cutting the 'green' red tape

By Sandra A. Swanson

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Part of Mayor Richard M. Daley's vision for Chicago entails shaping it into "the greenest city in America." Zina Murray is doing her part to help that happen.

She owns Logan Square Kitchen, a commercial kitchen and event space on track to receive LEED gold certification from the U.S. Green Buildings Council when the business opens this month.

While Ms. Murray, 52, praises the city workers she has encountered, she does have a couple of suggestions to make the process better (and the results greener).

Take a greener approach to TIF projects. Ms. Murray did not obtain TIF money for her project, securing instead a \$150,000 grant from Chicago's Small Business Improvement Funding program. TIF financing would have involved adhering to a second set of regulations — ensuring that at least half her construction workers resided in the city, among them — while already contending with a host of LEED requirements.

She agrees that entrepreneurs should be accountable for their use of public funds, but notes that currently the TIF requirements pertain only to construction issues. "(LEED and TIF) construction requirements don't line up in a very friendly way," she says.

If Chicago wants more green buildings, she suggests those TIF requirements include design aspects, too.

To obtain a green building permit from the city, developers essentially choose from a list of menu items, she says: "You pick the ones that work for your project." Ms. Murray suggests that TIF requirements could take a similar approach. For instance, developers who did not adhere to all of the construction requirements could still receive TIF money if they achieved a certain level of LEED certification.

"You'd have more flexibility for the developer, but you'd still have accountability to the public for taking the money," she says.

Find a way to reduce turnover in city departments. Ms. Murray received her green construction permit through the city's Department of Buildings. Since 2003, at least five commissioners have headed that department. "One thing that adds a layer of challenge is people change jobs really often," she says. The result: "Even with good people, they don't always know what to do."

She says she submitted her initial project design to the city in March 2008 and received her construction permit in January 2009.

"We interacted with four different green project managers in that nine-month period," she says. "Each time, it's a new person, and you kind of have to give them (your project's) background all over again." That muddles the process. "I think it's unavoidable. It doesn't just slow our project down. Think about the hundreds of projects they're looking at. It is just a momentum killer."

Says Ms. Murray: "People ask me all the time, 'How was the city to work with on your project?' The city isn't one being. The city is thousands of people in scores of departments that you interact with on a little project . . . so a lot of times I think people tend to oversimplify how big this thing is."