



# City's adoption of efficiency metric signals less reliance on third-party building certifications

Developers could still use LEED or other certifications to meet green building goals in Alexandria, Virginia, but the energy use intensity metric gives them an option just focused on efficiency.

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*Waterfront of city of Alexandria in Virginia at sunset. The city in early 2026 adopted a plan that gives developers the option to meet green building standards based on the energy use intensity metric. Getty Images*

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In a shift that building operators could see more of, the city council of Alexandria, Virginia, last month approved a plan that reduces its reliance on third-party certifications as the standard for measuring green building compliance by adding an additional option that's focused on a narrower standard: energy use intensity.

“I do think we're seeing a trend in that direction,” Matthew Allman, a partner with Venable, said in an interview. “I've not seen municipalities abandon third-party rating systems completely, but more and more of what they're doing is providing a menu of

options where you can achieve the green building policy [using] metrics related to energy use intensity.”

Energy use intensity, or EUI, is considered a more direct, performance-based sustainability goal than third-party certifications because it focuses on just one metric: the amount of energy a building uses per unit of gross floor area over a specific time, typically expressed as energy use per square foot per year.

“Developers will react [to an emphasis on EUI] by prioritizing energy modeling and building envelope performance over chasing certification points,” according to an analysis of Alexandria’s new plan by Sustainability Directory.

Prior to the change, Alexandria’s building plan required developers wanting to get a building permit to submit plans that aligned with one of several third-party certifications, including LEED, Green Globes and EarthCraft.

These certifications tend to look at a broader range of performance metrics. LEED, for example, looks at water use efficiency, greenhouse gas emissions, indoor environmental quality and the use of sustainable materials, among other things.

Under Alexandria’s new plan, developers of any commercial building that’s 10,000 square feet or larger could submit a plan aligning their project to one of the certifications or to the EUI standard. There’s no existing building retrofit requirement. There are slightly different requirements for building conversions and some multifamily properties.

Developers would also have to show how they would generate at least 3% of the building’s energy use from on-site renewable generation, typically rooftop solar. If meeting the 3% requirement would be a hardship, they can pay \$150,000 into a city fund.

The payment option would likely be attractive to developers of buildings that wouldn't have sufficient rooftop space to have both the solar panels and the building's mechanical equipment.

"Some of these urban lots, they're so small that it's difficult to actually get to that 3%," Venable Associate Megan Rappolt said in an interview. "They use that roof for mechanical equipment."

On-site geothermal might be another option but a system like that in a private commercial building would be a rarity, said Rappolt. "That's more of what a government [building] would do," she said.

Alexandria is a largely urban city of about 160,000 people that's part of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. It's known in part for its association with George Washington, who kept a townhouse in the city when he wasn't at his nearby Mt. Vernon estate.

With the change, the city joins a number of municipalities that use EUI in some form as part of their building performance standards. More cities could follow suit.

"Jurisdictions seem to be a little bit more focused on energy efficiency as a means of meeting their environmental goals," Allman said. "With the third-party rating systems, there may be a sense [that] there are so many things you can do to achieve a certain level of LEED certification that maybe aren't as aligned with the jurisdiction's specific goals, so they're trying to deemphasize [that] or offer alternatives to those routes."