Patel Center brings new shade of green to USF

By Sheryl Kay, Times Correspondent

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UNIVERSITY AREA — Its colors are gold and green, but the University of South Florida is one step closer to being greener.

After more than a year of planning, the university is about to break ground on the Dr. Kiran C. Patel Center for Global Solutions, its first ever LEED certified building.

Administered by the U.S. Green Building Council, a Washington, D.C., based, nonprofit coalition of building industry leaders, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System assigns a certification level based on a building's environmentally friendly features, including sustainability, water efficiency, energy and atmosphere, materials and resources utilized, and indoor environmental quality.

The construction of the Patel Center presented an opportunity to create a facility that exemplifies the global issues that will be tackled when it opens, such as maintaining ecological balance and providing communities with potable water and sanitation.

"We benefited from faculty and staff that are very interested in new construction being built in a sustainable fashion using processes that are more energy efficient," said Betty Castor, the center's executive director and a former USF president. "Building energy efficient buildings that are beautiful not only reflects the contemporary concerns of the USF faculty, but also all renewable energy issues that face the state and the nation."

In order to meet LEED criteria, the Patel Center will be built with many unique features, said Walter Pestrak, a project manager and architect for USF. Construction will include energy-efficient mechanical systems, glazing and insulation, soil erosion control, bike racks, innovative solar technology, a system for harvesting rooftop rainwater for plumbing use, and xeriscaping.

The buildout has been covered by a $5 million donation from Tampa cardiologist Dr. Kiran C. Patel and his pediatrician wife, Dr. Pallavi Patel, as well as $5 million in state funds.

While many of the materials and processes used in the design and construction are distinctive, they're not always more expensive, Pestrak said.

"Many sustainable strategies, materials and techniques do not cost more to implement and where costs are greater, there is often an energy (savings) and a healthier work environment," he said.

Some might think that means green translates to a more sterile, institutionalized look, but Castor noted that much attention has been paid to exterior and interior decor within the parameters of the LEED certification, including the use of specialized tiling, maple paneling, and bamboo veneer and frames.

"This will be a showcase building, right on Fowler Avenue, right next to the Alumni Center," she said. "It's going to be very nice, very comfortable, and extremely attractive."

Groundbreaking is planned for sometime in June.

Contact Sheryl Kay at skreporter@hotmail.com or call (813) 230-8788.