

ASK THE EXPERT

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Certified and Ready to Go

There are no national standards for certifying a site. Here is a handy guide to the typical certification process from a firm that specializes in evaluating mega-sites.

Q As we begin to look at sites for a new facility, we are coming across a number of sites designated as “Certified.” What is a certified site and how does this designation create value for us?

The Expert Says: A certified site is one which has been screened and evaluated against a set of development criteria in order to assess, and certify, its readiness for development.

The first thing to know is that there are no national, centralized standards for site certification. So if you are evaluating a site that carries such a designation, you should still evaluate the site in full against your project specific criteria. If a site has been certified, it will have readiness advantages if the evaluation items and their criteria definitions are properly identified and designed to align very closely to what you are looking for in a site. All of these criteria issues are ones that matter to you in how timely and how costly it will be to get you project developed on the property, so properly designed and executed programs will have real bottom line value to you.

Most certification programs will cover such fundamental criteria as property identification, property ownership and control, and availability. However, the “certification” criteria for each of these factors may vary from one program to another. With identification, there may informal

descriptions or there may be full boundary surveys completed. With ownership and control, one property may have an owner or owners identified while another may not address this in full, particularly for a site that has multiple owners or different owners of different parcels. Availability may be documented with a formal real estate listing, or an option



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held by a development agency, or even simply a letter from the owner(s). One key element of availability is an opening or list price.

A fundamental real estate issue is zoning. Since there are many reasons why a property may not be currently zoned for your intended purpose (including a lack of zoning regulations in the community), a properly certified site should address the zoning issues and the process, schedule and likelihood of achieving the required zoning designation in a

timely manner. Constructability issues include surface and near-surface conditions such as flood plain and soil conditions.

A major component of a site’s readiness is its development status. Four key studies that should be completed are Environmental Phase I, Wetlands Delineation, Endangered Species Study, and Archaeological Study. It is important to understand if additional work is required on the site. Permits, and even some incentive grant programs, require such studies, so having them done saves considerable time, and the knowledge gained will have a significant impact on your ability to develop the property as you wish.

The last big category covered by certified sites is infrastructure—energy (electric and gas), utility (water and wastewater), transportation (road, rail, water and air) and communication. There may be great variability in the criteria definitions used by different certification programs, and additional differences in the level of readiness required. At a minimum a certified site should document the presence of infrastructure and, if not immediately at the property, document with an independent third party the means, schedule and cost of providing the infrastructure.

In the end, the burden remains on you to fully assess each submitted certified property to be sure its program was properly designed and thoroughly executed. **BT**