

USGBC's Director of LEED - Wes Sullens | Transcript

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Introduction: Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the Green Building Movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED Fellow . Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

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Charlie: Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I love doing these podcasts for the past four and a half plus years. I get to expand my network a little bit, my thinking and because I get an interview, a green building professional somewhere in the world. We've got a special guest, the director of LEED at the US Green Building Council and he's had a couple of different roles there and even a storied background before that. We got Wes Sullens today. He's out in Oakland, California. Wes, How are you doing today?

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Wes: I'm doing great. Despite all the heat, we're in the middle of a heat wave here. It's September. It was 101 or 12 yesterday at my house anyway. Other than that, doing fine.

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Charlie: Other than that big problem in global warming. I hope things get better. I know it can be beautiful, Fall in the Bay Area coming up. I love to ask all my guests on the podcast. Just take us back, where did you grow up and go to school?

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Wes: First of all, thanks, Charlie, for hosting this and inviting me. Pleasure to be here. Where did I grow up? That's a long story. I'll try to keep it short. The best way you could say it is I had hippie parents. I was actually born in Tennessee, kind of in a communal living area environment. My parents quickly realized they wanted to live in California. They always loved California. We moved out there when I was young. I lived in San Francisco, Richmond, Oakland, bounced all around and eventually landed in Stinson Beach. If you haven't been out to Northern California, I'm biased because I live there, but I think it's one of the most beautiful places on earth and it's just an amazing place to be. We lived in a scrappy little one room shack near the beach, walking distance to the beach, and eventually lived in Bolinas and all around the area for until I went to school in Petaluma, which is a little farther north and more inland, they have things like high schools there. From the early days we were always outdoors at the beach, in the woods, we had very little money, so we didn't vacation. Our vacation was living where we wanted to be. So, camping, hiking, that was our stuff.

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Charlie: What part of Tennessee. I'm curious because I'm in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Wes: It was in Summertown, Tennessee, outside of Nashville, I guess a couple of hours. I haven't been back there many years, actually.

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Charlie: Northern California for the rest of that story. Sorry, I interrupted you there, but growing up so close to nature and close to the Pacific Ocean. Later going to college there, too, right?

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Wes: I've been here ever since. My dad was kind of a self-made contractor. He was a house painter and retired a few years ago. But that was my intro into the construction industry. I spent summers, weekends all the way through college painting houses with my dad, and we had a whole family crew for a while. My uncles would help and my brother and my sister would help. My mom even helped out sometimes, definitely a family business. We mostly painted these gorgeous houses out in Marin County, San Francisco as well, worked on some just beautiful Victorians and these mansions that overlook the ocean. And that was a big influence on me, being around construction sites, even from a very early age and painting in particular, because you're breathing a lot of fumes, you're dealing with chemicals, you're dealing with waste. There's a lot of waste in paint, all the paper, tape, plastic sheeting and all that stuff. From an early age, I realized there's a connection there between your health, the environment and these beautiful homes and environments we're trying to live in. A big influence on me and I eventually made my way to college. I didn't know what I wanted to be, so I started out at the junior college and that was the low cost option, the local option. There was a brand new campus in Petaluma and it was great. I had some amazing teachers. I took every class I wanted. That was English psychology history. I was all into the arts and long story, but I eventually met a teacher. There was one of my influences, Gloria de Blasio, who was teaching a course in Italy, like a semester abroad. I had a chance to go and it just blew my mind going overseas for the first time and seeing the world. Being in a different place in Florence, Italy, for about three or four months totally opened my eyes. When I came back, I got to get serious and I applied for Sonoma State, the California State University, I haven't done science. I might as well try that. I went for a Bachelor of Science degree, and they had this killer little program called Environmental Studies and Planning, which was kind of a small program, very small, but had some really great teachers and had good accolades. All my teachers were like Stanford Berkeley alumni, but they wanted to live in this small town a little north of there. A great experience.

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Charlie: What a really good influence there, for sure. I believe that undergrad was energy management design and next thing shortly after that LEED was coming out in the year 2000. Was there more energy efficiency, renewables, if you think back to that curriculum when you're getting that degree less like what you were studying at the time? I don't know if LEED was too early, right?

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Wes: LEED was in the wings. I graduated in 2000, so you'd hear a little rumor of this thing LEED . Simon even came to our college one time or came to our thing, and we were like, Let's meet this person is amazing. It was kind of in the wings towards the end of my work there. I had some amazing teachers and mentors at that college. One of my professors was a disciple of Buckminster Fuller, so I learned all about Bucky and how to think differently about problems. Like, that guy was amazing. Jay Baldwin was his name. We had another teacher who was an ex-Navy pilot from long ago who was an energy guru. He just had a love of energy efficiency. He made us do energy calculations by hand. He had this philosophy that if you're going to trust a computer to do your energy simulation, you've got to know what it's doing behind the scenes. He made us go by hand and calculate the energy efficiency of a building and never forget that work. I mean, it's just so important. It was a great program and I landed a job from one of my professors. I had a friend who liked to hire folks out of that program. I ended up in Oakland at a consulting firm called Synergy X Energy Synergy, just like the Xerox days. Which that company quickly got, became Kima and then DMV, I think it's DMG or something like that now. So they got acquired. But yeah, I did energy efficiency to begin with. I did rebate program administration checks, did lighting audits, cost studies for equipment, things like that. Yeah, it really started out in energy efficiency as my place.

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Charlie: I love it. You had all these influences to do something environmental. Then the building side starts coming together with your studies and in early 2000, energy efficiency. Tell us what was next. You spent a lot of years at Stop Waste. You've already got some LEED experience. Tell us how this career continued to stack.

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Wes: I kind of got hired into this energy group, but I quickly met a soul mate of mine, Jeff Cyphers, a person that was an engineer there, super smart and also passionate about sustainability. They had just completed a study for the City of Portland on the cost of green buildings. I think it was 1999 or something. And it was the cost of green. It was looking at after construction, theoretically. How much would it have cost to do a couple of buildings to LEED . It was one of the first cost studies ever, and it showed that it was not a big increase. And a couple of years later, the Greg Cat study came out, of course. But that was important because we went after an RFP from this little place called Stop Waste. Our qualification was one study saying the cost of LEED. Honestly at that time there was nobody else really with much more experience than that. We won the contract. Jeff and I all of a sudden from being this little tiny contract that kept going, getting added to every year because it was just growing and it was to consulting on LEED projects. So the county of Alameda where Stop Waste was located had a green building program and they were going to give out some grants for projects that were interested in LEED because they were trying to target construction waves. And so we helped administer the grant. We provided technical assistance, we wrote guidelines and we helped them through LEED. Meanwhile, we did a few LEED projects consulting as well. And I'll tell you that was in 2001, by 2006 when I left. Energy Karma. We had about eight employees full time and it kind of had a whole sustainability arm and that's what we were doing full time was LEED consulting primarily and other sustainability work.

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Charlie: I love that early. The cost of studying. As we know, those costs continue to go down as more and more can have the LEED conversation. We've seen green buildings really still make good business sense. Any other mentors or influencers and then we'll move on to accomplishments.

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Wes: So much of this movement of green building has been people that come before us. We're standing on the shoulders. At Stop Waste when I went I left chemo's energy to go to stop waste, which was our client for all those years. I managed the green building program there and there were folks like Wendy Summer, Mary Saul and Ludwig. They were all managing the green building program. Some of the first then. And we helped write guidelines. We wrote multifamily guidelines, the first kind of rating system for multifamily in the Bay Area, at least that eventually went statewide. There were a lot of experts there that I was just kind of so eager and excited to be with these legends. I got to go to Green Build. The first one that was, I guess back in 2001, I went to Greenbuild and kept going and would see these folks. Kevin Hydes, Andre a tree, Berlin. Simon David Godfried got to meet David and he's now a friend. It's just been amazing to be part of this community of these folks from the beginning. I was a bright eyed, kind of excited person who was a wannabe back then and just wanted to help out any way I could. It's just been fun. There's just so many good influences in this community.

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Charlie: Those are some legends there. One more look back here. What are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

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Wes: One time we painted a house from Julia Morgan, the famous architect. That was kind of neat. Professionally, I'd say writing the multifamily guidelines was a huge milestone. This was a book that is now part of the Greenpoint rated program in California, but it was really the first

comprehensive guidelines in 2004. That was just a year long. I just dove in. I read all the environmental building news and every article you could find online, and we came up with these guidelines. So that was a big one. And then working at Stop Waste got to do a lot of firsts in terms of LEED, like the first platinum building that was a major renovation which stopped waste was their headquarters, the first building that was also the first building to get DB for LEED before and just had a ton of grants and things like that. I guess the other I'd say one, I'd be remiss if I didn't say the LEED Fellow . That was hard. I didn't pass it the first time and that was a lot of work to get and that was definitely an accomplishment.

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Charlie: For those listening. Wes is a Fellow, LEED Fellow, and it's not like all of a sudden someone taps you on the shoulder and you get it. It's quite the process. It's peer nominated, many different forms of back and forth and committees. It's pretty selective. Congrats on that. That's got to be validating for especially that early work you did and and now in the role of course that you've transitioned to which we'll talk about next. I'm going to ask about materials because as I look at your bio, even before you were on staff at the USGBC, if I have it right, you really started doing some things with some of the technical committees or maybe the tag around materials. I think so. Tell us why materials and what have you been doing there? And then we'll talk today.

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Wes: Materials have always been a passion and I kind of started out with residential products and materials, given the multifamily guidelines, the other work I did, but that's one of the first things that we did as consultants back in the day. One thing about energy efficiency and commissioning, but the other big new thing for people doing LEED early days was materials, recycled content, construction waste. These were things nobody was really tracking that much. So and then working at Stop Waste, we're able to get some funding and do some work on things like measuring the carbon

footprint of materials. I'm talking like 2006, 2007-8t and even later and we had like a calculator, a climate calculator for Greenpoint rated one point. I was sharing that in these circles at one point and I heard about the LEED Technical Advisory Group. I applied and I got on it, which was great. That was in 2011 or 12 or something like that. I became a volunteer for the LEED tag, the materials and resources tag, and served the full term there and had kind of a front row seat from the conversion of LEED 2009 to LEED before, which was pretty amazing like the changes going on in the industry and leave before we. Looking at iPads and lifecycle analysis and all these things that, again, we had never heard of as an industry. It was amazing to be there as part of that.

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Charlie: But that is really neat. Let's talk about what's keeping you busy today. As I understand it, you've had a few years as the director on the technical side, still some material work. But in the last three years man all things helping steer LEED and these next iterations. Tell us about the US Green Building Council and some of what you've been doing and kind of what's keeping you busy today.

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Wes: LEED is keeping us busy, that's the thing. You've probably seen that we've got some big plans for the future. What comes next? There's been some talk and criticism about what LEED needs to do in the future. We're trying to answer that and have a solid climate focused solution. So what comes next and LEED , that's what's exciting to us, where we're starting to create some documents around what we're planning to be. The future of LEED released a document a roadmap released a few months ago that kind of outlined what we're planning to do on carbon and resilience and equity and all these topics that are so important to the rating system. So kind of behind the scenes on the staff side, we're working to get that ramped up, to put the pieces in place so that we can start to really create the next version of LEED while also maintaining, of course, the existing rating systems that

are out there. But that's really what's keeping us going is thinking about the future.

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Charlie: It's been good to me. It's been good to you. It's really it's almost like there's this 20 plus year. Hey, LEED, you help have the conversation about certified buildings all over the world and put green buildings on the map. So now it's your responsibility to do more. I'm sure that's what some of you in the team are probably feeling and from the critics. I just want to thank you and all the USGBC staff. It still continues to be a great program, a global leading program. It's hard to be one size fits all. I mean, there's new priorities, but let's keep tweaking. To our listeners, I'll put a link to that recent publication infographic. Somebody can read up on it. Give us a peek a little more into your world. I know there's some staff obviously in the Washington DC area, there's some remote staff and they have a lot of meetings, a lot of research or kind of what's the day look like?

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Wes: Oh, boy, they're always different. That's what keeps it exciting and fun. Good. I'm a remote employee. I'm out in California, the Bay Area here, like you said. It's been interesting through the pandemic, we were all remote employees for a while and the office is now going back to work. We're closer than we've been as a team, which is interesting, still definitely need to get in person and that kind of thing like that green building coming up. The day to day, it's all over the place like some days I'm working on. The other thing I work on is building green building codes. So that takes up a bit of my time. There's some things happening locally with Cal Green and the State and things like that, but primarily it's working with the LEED team and our committees. We have a great set. If you haven't heard folks, we have committees that are technical advisory groups for LEED, of all the credit categories, and also there's LEED advisory committees and LEED steering committee and things. And so we spend quite a bit of time working with those volunteers to fine tune places and LEED that need to be updated

or to again think about the future of what comes next. So we're working on right now actually we're talking about calls for volunteers like who's the new folks going to be for our next year of committee volunteers. But really underlining all of this is what's coming next. And that's where we're putting all of our attention and energy. And so to get a little more specific, carbon. We know climate change is the number one issue, of course, but we can't be blindsided on that. But for the next version of LEED, what does that look like? Is it a new credit category? Is it a requirement that is about reducing embodied carbon? Of course we need to get to zero, but should we go beyond that? There's a lot of talk around regenerative, especially talking about materials and resources and impacts like it's the whole less bad is not enough. We actually do have to be positive and do good. So really where I'm excited is the regenerative talk. How do we take buildings and have them be a part of the solution and actually create better environments and better communities and all the way ripple down through the supply chain? Better products, better materials means better lives down the supply chain, fenceline, communities, all of that. So it's really challenging. We're going to have to cut some things at some point, but for now, it's all on the table. We're learning and soaking up and sponging up all the good ideas that are out there. And that's what keeps us busy. Talking to code people, talking to environmental organizations. Forestry groups. It depends week to week we're talking to all these folks, experts in real estate, ESG embodied carbon. It just goes on and on. Of course, energy efficiency, refrigerant experts, we're doing it all. We're trying to kind of map the universe and then we're going to do what we do, which is start to write credits around it starting next year.

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Charlie: It reminds me a little bit of 2009 and going from version 2.2 to version three. I know you probably don't have an exact timeline, but could you give a very wide range to remind our listeners if there's going to be some updates, it could be out for ballot. This will take a little time, but it sounds like you're trying to move quickly with it. Any prediction on when we

might have a newer version of LEED to take a look at? We're on the LEED version for version 4.1 now, so it's just anything you could share if possible. If not, I understand. But coming soon.

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Wes: The goal is to have something to share next year, probably at Green Build ish. That's where we tend to bring things to our community. We've got six months or so of hard work and then we start to put all the pieces together and, and share that with the community. That's the goal that'll happen.

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Charlie: What we've been talking about a little bit of what's next for LEED . But maybe outside of LEED , if you had a crystal ball, what are you getting excited about in the future of green buildings, the future of sustainability, anything you kind of read up on what else is coming at us?

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Wes: From the materials side, I really am interested in circularity and having the circular economy and having it realized. There's so many good ideas, but actually executing a circular economy is so challenging. I see that as a place where you need kind of the right supportive policies and you need leading innovation from companies and manufacturers and and then you need something like LEED or other triggers that allow to capture that value outside of just the first cost of products or materials. Circularity is a really important concept we've always been kind of playing with in LEED, the recycled content and all those have been in there. But really going double down and getting into the business case and seeing interesting new business ventures and models, that's where it's at. I see that happening not just in buildings, but in all kinds of products and maybe it starts in another product category and it's already starting in consumer products and beverages and things like that. You're seeing packaging that's becoming more circular or fashion, that kind of thing as well. I think the Circular

Economy is one that we need to keep track of. Another one is regenerative. We said it already, but how do we get beyond just zero? Carbon storing materials like getting the science of that, how do you sequester carbon in products and materials? And is that a real thing? There's a lot of interest around things like offsets and things, but there's also a lot of fuzzy math out there. How do you cut through all that and get to true solutions that add value and make for a better environment? I see sequestration as a way to capture carbon and circularity.

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Charlie: To all of our listeners, ask yourself, how can you help speed all that up if you believe it too? Let this be saved in the cloud so we can you and I can listen back on it one day and see how correct we were. But I love it and I'm happy to hear LEEDS is going to try to incorporate a little bit of all that in some pieces. That's going to be great. Some rapid fire questions. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

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Wes: Oh, man, I don't like to talk about myself. I think what I try to do and given my background watching all these kinds of giants in the industry around me, is that I'm not the one who comes up with the great ideas, honestly, and usually the one who puts those into practice and helps to scale them up. That tends to be my role. So I don't know if that's a gift or whatever, but listening to smarter people around me and amplifying it as an example is like the green building code in California. When that was first starting. I was there at the table and lots of good ideas were made there. But ever since then I've been helpful to kind of scale up that green code, make it mandatory in more places. And now at USGBC, I help with the International Green Code, the IPCC, and which is again, these are just collections of good ideas. But the point is, how do we scale it up? How do we get it more influential?

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Charlie: It is a gift. There's visionaries, there's integrators. In your case, I think you're taking it further and saying, "Hey, how do we scale this up? And those codes?" That's pretty far reaching with that impact, man. I don't know if you ever just sit and think you've had a big influence on LEED California building codes and now, like you said, the international. So it's a big deal. So do you have any good habits or routines? Rituals.

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Wes: Oh man I love I gotta get out in nature. I'll just say, "This work is awesome. It's great." But sitting at a computer is hard and using your brain and thinking about all these topics can be infuriating. Demoralizing all that if you think too much about the climate that's changing around us and such. I've got to get out there, got to get into nature, get in the trees. I love exercising bikes, hiking, and water at all. I try to get out as much as possible every day a little bit. And then the bigger trip spitting harder because I have kids and now with school and sports, it's like there's not a lot of free time. My other other thing I like to do, which is watch my kids play sports, they play ice hockey. It's really fun. Watching them come alive when they're so excited. They love it. They're happy. That feeds me. It's really nice.

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Charlie: You get that from your childhood, as you shared with us that being out in nature. I love you're doing that with your kids. As we get to know each other more, I'm a fan of a bucket list, so can you give us a peek? What are a couple of things on Western's bucket list? Maybe some adventure, some travel, maybe you want to write a book?

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Wes: I have not given that much thought. I do want to ride my bike to a Point Raise. I don't know if you've been out of the Bay Area but start from somewhere and ride the Point Race. That would be super fun. I got to get in shape enough to do that and not an e-bike. My kid tells me I cannot get an e-bike until I'm after 60, so that's one I'd like to get back to New Zealand. I

traveled there once years ago and it was just amazing. I want to go back there and actually somehow, how do we get carbon neutral travel? That's one thing I do love to travel. Getting back to Europe and traveling post-pandemic, It's pretty simple at this point, honestly. Like the bucket list is like getting life back to normal a bit and getting out and doing things while I'm still active, I don't have to jump out of an airplane or any of that stuff. I'm pretty risk averse.

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Charlie: Thanks for giving us a peek there. I love it. What does that normal one, that carbon neutral travel, come in pieces, but there's still a little more to do there, that's for sure. That can sometimes be the biggest carbon footprint. Right, is the jet plane. But I love the bucket list items. Thanks for sharing. Let's talk about books. Is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about our industry or buildings. Just a good book you'd recommend to our listeners.

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Wes: I'm not a huge reader, but actually what I'm reading now, I've got it here with me. It's kind of a strange one, or not strange, but I just picked it up because I'm going to New York for a work trip and every time I go there, I try to go to Greenwich Village and I'm reading a book called Romany Marie. She's a self called the Queen of Greenwich Village, and she was a somebody who ran a restaurant in the 1915 to 1940 or something in Greenwich Village, various restaurants. And it was just the enclave for bohemians at the time. They would come there and write poetry or do songs or whatever. Bucky Fuller would go there and get some great ideas. So I like to kind of go hang out in that area of New York. I've only been there a couple of times and think about what it was like back then. I'm sure all those buildings are probably gone now and replaced, but there's a few things left.

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Charlie: Solid recommendation and I love that because it's helping you prepare for that trip and then you connected it back to Buller. Great recommendation. We'll put a link to that book in the show notes. This is a fantastic interview. I'm really enjoying getting to know you more. So let's talk about career advice. Is there anything you wish you'd known a little earlier in your career?

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Wes: I don't know. I've been so fortunate. It's hard to say something I would have received early. I think one of the things would have been to. I guess what I would tell somebody in my shoes today would be like, don't worry so much about where you get on this bus, if you will, this journey towards sustainability, towards regenerative environmental issues. Just get on. I mean, pick your place, see where you're good at something and enter. I did and got the advice from everyone like, if it's energy efficient, great. If all of a sudden it turns into a green building, go for it. If it's building codes, if it's circular economy, just ride the wave, man. Get on and ride it. I toyed with getting graduate degrees and things like that over the years and a couple of years later I find myself working with those same people on projects and it's just like once you're in the ecosystem doing good work, there's kind of a there's a harmony to it or a synergy or something that happens. I think it would have been that just like, don't worry so much about the path, just go in at full force with all the effort you can and good things will happen.

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Charlie: Last question. Let's say someone's listening to this podcast. They're really getting excited about the green building movement. Green building, it's been good to you. It's been good to me. AThey might be early in their career or they might be making a career pivot, but they are saying, hey, green buildings are next for me as we close. Any words of encouragement?

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Wes: Come on in. The great thing about this industry, at least from my perspective and my history and nobody has all the answers. We know that we're all kind of doing the best we can in directions that we can. If you're interested in coming into this career field and joining it again, get on the train anywhere you can. And don't be afraid to come up with new ideas. This group is all about innovation. From the beginning, from LEED, from all these concepts we've talked about living buildings and all that stuff, it's all new. We're rewriting some history there. You know, one of my favorites. I'm going to share a quote or a paraphrase. One of my favorite rock artists is Roger Waters from Pink Floyd, of course. He said some quote, somewhere like they were asking about the wall. I know this is a tangent, but the album, The Wall, the great seminal album, they were asking him, how can you do this? This is like an epic. You're writing like a movie or a story or something, and it's too much for rock and roll. And he responded saying, You can't tell me the limits of my art like I am here doing. This is a new art form. It's still a new form. We're folding it, we're molding it. You can't tell me the limits of what I'm here to do, but I think you went on to write an opera and stuff. I'm not sure how successful that was, but the point is green buildings were still early. I mean, I worked with people at Stop Waste that were in recycling for 30 years before we even started. Think of it like we'll be the veterans soon, Charlie, and we need all the new ideas that are going to come up behind us. So anyway, don't think we have all the ideas. Don't be afraid to jump in.

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Charlie: We're getting encouragement and great quotes. So thank you for sharing it. And so to everybody, make sure you connect with us on LinkedIn. I don't know what you thought of this interview and Wes, thank you for your time. I just can't wait to see what's next for LEED . And I'm glad you're helping steer this. So thanks for everything you do.

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Wes: Thank you, Charlie. And thank you for all you do for this industry, these podcasts, the work you do with the fellows. You're a gem. Thank you so much. Appreciate being asked to be here.

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Charlie: I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters podcast. Me and the entire team, we're stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us, straight to you.

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Wes: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters podcast at GBES.com. Our mission is to advance the Green Building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to GBES.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast. Tell your colleagues and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much and we'll see you on next week's episode.