

**EFFECTIVE SITE CERTIFICATION**

**WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO ACCOMPLISH IT**

**Michael H. Tomlinson**

**St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation**

**St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

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# **EFFECTIVE SITE CERTIFICATION--WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO ACCOMPLISH IT**

## **I. What is a Site Certification Program?**

Site certification is a method of reducing the risk for a prospect.

Site certification saves a prospect time and money, reduces risk and shortens the ever increasingly shrinking and critical “time to market” aspect. It lets a prospect definitively know, right at the outset, how much time it will take and how much it will cost to start building a new facility. It removes uncertainty and allows a prospect to quickly determine the suitability of a given site relative to a given set of site selection parameters.

Jeannette Goldsmith with McCallum Sweeney Consulting, in her paper “*Shovel Ready Sites*” points out that a Certified Site Program should have three basic components.

- Stringent evaluation and decision criteria. Was stringent criteria established against which the sites would be evaluated before they are deemed certified?
- Comprehensive information collection. Did the program’s sponsors require extensive data collection on site?
- Third-party assessment and verification. The information needs to be reviewed and verified by an independent third-party.

It is important to note that often the term “*shovel ready*” is often used in lieu of the term “*certified site*” and vice versus. It could be argued that shovel ready and certified site are not necessarily the same thing and oftentimes they are not. A true shovel ready site is one where construction could literally begin immediately, as soon as whatever construction permits, etc.,

are secured. Certified site indicates all due diligence has been performed regarding what would be needed to have a site prepared and ready to build on. The point is simply that a true shovel ready site does not necessarily mean that it is certified and a certified site does not necessarily mean that a site is truly shovel-ready. A true shovel ready site should, theoretically speaking, have no problem attaining a certified site status.

Site certification, when properly conducted and documented, will reflect what due diligence has been performed, e.g. the actual determination of jurisdictional wetlands, and what has not been actually been performed but will need to be before construction can begin. A certified site should clearly reflect what it would take to do a particular thing, how long it would take to do it and how much it would cost as well as providing the specific documentation, (e.g. engineering studies or plans), ergo reducing the risk for the prospect and reducing the time to market and this goes directly to the prospect's bottom line. A certified site tells a story, a story that will serve to inform a prospect and to provide that prospect all the information they need to make a decision in their best interest. A certified site provides a sort of developmental map, a map that will quickly and accurately allow the prospect to ascertain the amount of time and money it will take to start building their facility. A prospect looking for a new site to facilitate an expansion or relocation needs to know when they can have that new facility placed in service and conducting trade and commerce because until then, profits are not realized.

Jeannette Goldsmith with McCallum Sweeney Consulting, in her paper "*Shovel Ready Sites*" states "Intensifying the demand for certified sites is the fact that companies decision-making time frames are getting shorter. Companies are not willing to wait for a community to find an appropriate site and determine its suitability for development--that due diligence needs to done before a prospect comes calling." [sic]

Bill King, in his paper entitled “*More Than Dirt*”, quotes Bob Farley, President of Economic Development for AngelouEconomics, as saying “The old 1960s-to1980s orientation of ‘We’ve got land’ no longer works. Companies want to know how you’re going to have the site ready to go and who will bear the cost. If you don’t have these, you’re in a world of hurt competitively.”

In a white paper, entitled, “*Beyond Shovel Ready*” prepared by Moran, Stahl & Boyer, (MS&B) they actually view site certification on a multi-level scale that ranges from land zoned as agriculture but is to be zoned Industrial all the way to a fully developed site with a new building in place though still needing finish and minor modifications. Within that range MS&B has identified a multi-level scale that has 7 distinct levels starting with Level 7, which is land zoned agriculture and going all the way to Level 1, which is the fully developed site with a building in place. Level 5 in this tiered approach is considered an undeveloped site that has ownership/title in place and ready for sale as well as completed zoning, surveys complete, permitting agencies poised for approvals, infrastructure within reasonable access, compatible adjacent land use and conceptual site plan and general covenants in place. Whereas Level 4, is a developed site ready for building construction with lots defined and graded, roads and utilities in place with service to lots and some permits secured and covenants defined. MS&B also states that Level 4 and Level 5 would be classified as shovel ready depending on the definition utilized.

Additionally and interestingly, MS&B also defines what “Shovel Ready to Resource Ready” means. There must be special emphasis on certain resources required by specific industries so therefore, knowing what type of business a community wants to attract is a critical component of what constitutes a certified site. Does the type of companies that a community wants to attract need high water and sewer and capacity as well as low energy costs or conversely does the type

of businesses a community wants to attract require a telecommunications backbone that can offer high reliability and capacity?

It is the opinion of this writer that a good site certification program must inventory the full range of all the aspects of what a site has in place and it will also serve to reflect what a site does not have. A certified site is a tool that can be used by a prospect to quickly surmise if a particular site is suitable for a prospect's industry sector. A particular site cannot be all things for all prospects.

MS&B also point out in their white paper that the *“Shovel ready concept is meant to reduce the time, risk and upfront costs for a prospective company.”* This demonstrates one of the needs of a prospect in the area of reducing the prospect's initial cost of entry.

Site certification is an effort that involves a wide range of stakeholders, such as state and local Economic Development Organizations (EDO's), private land owners, professional developers, regional Economic Development Organizations, municipalities, private and public utility companies, especially the electric, gas, telecommunications companies. Additionally the normally found municipal sewer and water services entities. Site certification programs are designed to increase the inventory of sites that are ready to be developed and is a site that is ready to serve the best interests of site selectors, individual prospects and individuals that are seeking to identify potential sites for expansion, relocation or in the area of retention when a local company needs to relocate for whatever reason.

A properly designed site certification program is a pragmatic approach based on the due diligence required to fully document all the attributes needed by a site to be considered a “certified site” and the process should be “exhaustive and comprehensive” since the site selectors and individual prospects looking for potential locations are ever increasingly raising the bar and

demanding a higher level of “first look” requirements. In other words, site selectors and prospects will already have a long list of site criteria and the time frame that that is given to have the information that they require is becoming shorter and shorter.

Requests For Proposals (RFP’s) that are becoming the norm often require site submittals within one to two weeks from the time they are received by economic development organizations and to meet these type of abbreviated time frames demands that a ready-to-go inventory of sites be at hand that are up to date and current.

### **Components of the Site Certification Information Criteria**

Site certification programs that are comprehensively designed will have the following basic information in an easily accessed and logically formatted design. Depending upon the targeted focus of a particular site more or less emphasis should be placed on different aspects and the following list could contain areas not addresses or specifically listed.

- Zoning - Efforts should be made to ensure that the highest and best use zoning is firmly in place. Usually this will be some type of Industrial Zoning traditionally this type of zoning accommodating manufacturers, distributors, supply houses and other similar non-retail goods and service providers. The old adage, “Well, we can always get is rezoned” is not what a site selector wants to hear. Rezoning requires public hearings and applications and wild cards such as unanticipated or anticipated public opposition that can and will add to the time frame of when a site is ready to be developed.
- Title Work - Ensuring that a clear title is present and that all necessary title work has been completed.

- Environmental Studies - Has the Phase One Environmental Assessment been completed and if necessary the Phase Two Environmental and subsequent mitigation? This is an extremely critical aspect as it will largely dictate a particular site's suitability for a particular industry, including the local attainment status with regard to air quality. This will also serve to identify the proximity to special protected areas such as national parks and other sensitive areas.
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Permitting - Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. 1344). The USACE have to make a determination if there are any jurisdictional wetlands on a site, normally referred to as wetland delineation and if there are lands deemed to be jurisdictional wetlands on the site then wetland mitigation will be required. This requires time and a financial investment usually on behalf of the landowner or developer. A good certified site should not only have the wetlands delineation complete but, if required, mitigation should be complete, if at all possible.
- Soils Analysis with borings completed to establish various potential uses.
- Historical and Archaeological surveys complete.
- Publically or Privately Owned Infrastructure:
  - Roads and Highways - What is current condition of access road and distance and accessibility to Interstate highways. Can existing roadway handle any appreciable amount of truck traffic and is site developed to accommodate ingress and egress needs of heavy truck traffic. If roadways are not in place or up to what would be needed for an industrial site has engineering and traffic studies been performed

and how soon could improvements be in place? This, of course, introduces the wild card of available funds to actually do the work needed. LCDBG economic development grants, EDAP (Economic Development Award Program) and other competitive sources of funds take time to apply for and process and there is no guarantee that funds such as that will be available. In addition, public infrastructure assistant funds often times require that a business location is pending. When a developer, land owner, public body or economic development organization is putting together a site certification package there is not usually a pending location.

- Potable Water - What are capacity and availability and source of available process and “drinking” water both in terms of maximum demand quantity and consumption, e.g. gallons per minute/hour and gallons per day or per month.
- Waste Water (including sanitary sewer) - This particular component is far too often overlooked until the late into the process and should be at the forefront. Has an engineering study been completed for a design and who shall pay for it and how long will it take to build or is there a waste water system already in place? Consider action must be afforded as to what the surrounding area can withstand regarding discharge levels for items such as BOD (Biological Oxygen Demands), TSS (Total Suspended Solids), O&G (Oil and Grease) and DO (Dissolved Oxygen). Just a general rule of thumb indicates that levels of BOD 10 to 30 ppm, TSS 10 to 30 ppm, DO 2 to 5 ppm and O&G needs to be near zero.

- Storm Water - Storm water drainage and sanitary sewer must be kept separate and this is a distinct challenge depending on how the systems are designed.
  - Rail Infrastructure
  - Air Transportation Infrastructure
  - Water Transportation Infrastructure
  - Geography and Geological Assessment
  - Topographic survey
- What does the land cost? This is very important when a site is still privately held and not in the public domain or owned by an economic development organization. Prospects need to know, up front, what the land costs.

Ownership of the certified site is a recurring theme that has appeared more than once in the information researched for this paper and that common theme is that ownership of the site has been transferred from the original owner to an economic development organization, local government or other third party.

On the other hand, Mark Sweeney, principal with McCallum Sweeney, stated that the certified site can be held privately and that McCallum Sweeney has worked with a number of private landowners in the context of a site certification program.

Third party validation, assessment and verification must also be a requirement of any comprehensive site certification program. This third party validation, assessment and verification should have a stringent requirements and must be conducted by a professional entity trained and

skilled in this type of activity, e.g. engineering firms, private consultants, etc. The validity of the site certification document must be beyond reproach and fully researched and documented.

## **II. Benefits of a site certification program.**

The benefit of a good site certification program is that allows a community to be prepared and ready to go when a prospect is considering their prospective region. McCallum Sweeney Consulting, in their Power Point presentation entitled “Helping Companies Decide Where to Build” stated:

- What do communities need? Sites that are ready to go! [sic]
- Why do you need them? Company timeframes are getting shorter.
- Companies are becoming more risk adverse.
- At the end of the day, companies do not build facilities in communities, they build them on sites!

The last statement goes to the heart of a site certification program and it certainly bears repeating. *“At the end of the day, companies do not build facilities in communities, they build them on sites!* Sites that offer a company the lowest cost of entry and provides for the highest probability of meeting or preferably exceeding their targeted profit margins are sites that reduce the risk for the prospect. In the end, it is all about return on investment and risk mitigation. Which site will provide a particular company the most opportunity in overall profitability?

Having a good site certification program does not magically create sites that are certified site ready, but a good site certification program will clearly outline what it takes to have a site that is

ready to go to market. It provides a detailed road map that clearly lays out what a developer or a land owner needs to do to truly have a site that is ready to market as a potential location for a company to consider expanding or relocating to. It is the difference between a piece of dirt and a location that offers the profit potential that companies are looking for.

Additionally, also derived from McCallum Sweeney Consulting, in their Power Point presentation entitled “Helping Companies Decide Where to Build” the bottom line benefit of having a good site certification program is that it, “Enhances competitiveness of your location, increases site marketability and having sites that are ‘ready to go’ increase a site’s chances for success.”

### **III. Obstacles to achieve site certification that results in an inventory of certified sites.**

What are the obstacles that would stand in the way of a site becoming “site certified?” Namely and most importantly is money. An individual land owner may be reluctant to spend the money that is needed to achieve full site certification since this entails a considerable amount of work and securing the services of professionals to do the work necessary to comply with all the site certifications requirements is expensive. This is understandable but it is the difference between a piece of land for sale and a certified site. Professional development firms or private site selection consultants often will do a good job of preparing a site to become site certified. Usually a professional development firm will not only develop a site that is ready to go but will develop a site that is targeted to a specific industry sector or type of company and based on knowing what type of company is the focus will dictate the type of infrastructure and zoning needs. Developing a site that is focused on a particular type of company or industry sector allows for better proactive marketing and provides for the quickest to market opportunity for a company.

In lieu of a professional development or a specialized private site selection firm a local government or non-profit economic development organization could take ownership of the land and perform the same function but again that takes money and commitment, which is often in short supply, especially in a time of deep recession and uncertainty. For a private landowner, the financial commitment required to have a site certified ready is sometimes the biggest obstacle. Having a good site certification program at the state or regional level is a tremendous asset for the local communities, economic development organizations and private land owners.

Some communities will not have the financial resources necessary to accomplish everything before hand at a particular site. Bill King, in his paper "*More Than Dirt*" quotes Buzz Canup of Canup & Associates, "For example, some sites you need 2 million to 3 million gallons of water a day, and those things cost big bucks," says Canup. "Better to go through the due diligence planning that shows how you will do it. It's the credibility of the due diligence that sells the site.

In the same paper Bill King states that "In other words, what is the engineered solution to the problem? How are you going to do it? Who is going to do it? Where will it go? Who will pay for it? According to many site location experts, if you have everything pre-planned with engineered solutions, that's just as good."

#### **IV. Observations from Professional Developer Community**

A few individuals involved in developing sites, doing the engineering for prospects and clients, acting as third-party verifiers and actually developing site certification programs were interviewed for this paper.

Sean Burkes, P.E., with J.V. Burkes & Associates, a civil engineering, surveying and environmental company located in Slidell that has worked on many projects with prospects engaged in the site selection process offered the following when asked what he perceived as the value of a site certification programs and how important is it to have a site pre-certified.

“Every site has issues that many professionals have to look at to determine the scope of work, cost and time frame to project startup. The Site Certification process identifies these issues in a reliable manner so that cost and time frame can easily be determined. Risk is reduced so that good business decisions can be made. A typical large scale site can take many months and tens of thousands of dollars to determine a site is not a good fit. The value is huge to the potential purchaser - to eliminate sites quickly and pinpoint wanted sites immediately-so that negotiations can begin. The value is also huge to the potential seller ---reduce due diligence periods, contract extensions, and last minute requests for price reductions on the property to accommodate these site issues. It is a fair way to determine quickly and concisely value of property for both parties.”

Burkes goes on to say that, “We had a nationwide client that would create their own "due diligence" program for all potential sites. We quickly knew all issues that needed to be incorporated into the design. Turnaround time from property purchase to completed construction was 200% - 300% faster than other projects that we had worked on.”

Townsend Underhill, MBA, CCIM, Vice President of Development for Stirling Properties, Inc. a development; commercial brokerage; property and asset management; investment sales; property owner and tenant representation firm located in Covington, Louisiana was asked the same question regarding his view of the value and how important he thought a site certification program is. Stirling Properties, Inc. is. Stirling Properties has one of the first official “Certified

Sites” in Louisiana and it located in the Madisonville/Covington area, just south of I-12 and west of Hwy 21 at exit # 59 on I-12.

Underhill states that “The biggest advantage of this program (site certification) to a user and land owner is that it creates a clear separation between the perception and reality. By this I mean that the truly qualified sites that have secured their rights to build and are a reality become the most visible to the users (prospects) while the pretender sites that give the perception they have secured the rights to build quickly fall out of line. This is a clear and defined benchmark (certified site) that carries credibility for landowners.”

Underhill goes on to say that “I believe this program (certified sites) is extremely important to the state’s (Louisiana) ability to attract quality business prospects as it provides instant credibility to the state and regional economic development groups to have these designated, qualified sites in their portfolio when showing new prospects.

Finally, Mark Sweeney, Principal with McCallum Sweeney Consulting (MSC), one of the nation’s leading site selection, incentive negotiation and economic development consulting firms was interviewed. In addition to their standard services, MSC has developed certified site programs for a wide range of clients including the watershed TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority) megasite program.

Mark Sweeney says that site certification is a rapidly growing trend driven by speed-to-market pressures on companies and that a well-designed site certification program is realistic, rigorous and educational. Realistic because development projects are exhaustive and the site certification process should be as well. Educational since site certification is an opportunity to better understand the site selection process and also an opportunity to gain knowledge and experience

in data sourcing, gathering, management and communication. In addition, Sweeney pointed out that the site selection process in today's world is driven by market demand and market forces and requires both reactive and proactive marketing and the site certification process prepares potential sites for the prospects (proactive) and facilitates a community's capability to effectively employ reactive marketing which is answering the questions and to effectively communicate. Site certification mitigates risk for the prospect and facilitates the prospect's ability to move quickly.

Sweeney also stressed that utilizing a third party up-front in the design of the site certification program and securing a good independent third party to assess, validate and verify the site certification submittals is absolutely critical.

When Sweeney was asked about what obstacles are currently facing site certification programs he offered the following. In areas where wetlands are involved, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is not going to place a priority on a certified site application versus a site that has an active project pending. This makes securing the wetlands jurisdictional determination difficult and time consuming, which is a precursor to the mitigation needed if required. This is becoming more of an issue and impediment to current site certification efforts.

Mike Sibley, Director Economic Developer for Cleco Power LLC adds that "Site certification does not certify a site's quality, only the ability of the site to limit the risk to a potential prospect."

## **V. Examples of Site Certification Programs in the United States**

Site Certification as a defined program is a rapidly growing trend across the United States, as earlier stated and to that end, a brief listing of some of the major programs will be offered here.

1) Oregon's Oregon Prospector. Oregon Prospector.com is a site certification program that is highly regarded by many. This program has certified 47 sites totaling over 3,300 acres. 19 of these sites have been sold creating 2,500 jobs. [www.oregonprospector.com](http://www.oregonprospector.com)

2) TVA's Megasite Program. In 2004, the Tennessee Valley Authority established one of the first site certification programs named TVA Megasite Program. Since 2004, five megasites have been sold to companies such as: Dow Corning/Hemlock Semiconductor, VW, Paccar, Toyota and SeverCorr. Their third party verifier is McCallum Sweeney Consulting. [www.tvaed.com/megasites](http://www.tvaed.com/megasites)

3) Duke Energy's Site Readiness Program. This is the sixth year of this program and serves the counties in North Carolina and South Carolina that Duke Energy serves. Their basic criteria are industrial sites that are a minimum of 75 acres or larger. In addition, in 2009 Duke Energy contracted with the site selection consulting firm, InSite Consulting to pilot a new "Building Readiness Program" in the Carolinas. The focus is on available existing and spec buildings and to help the respective communities identify strength and weaknesses, identify recommended improvements and identify the best potential target prospects. [www.considerthecarolinas.com/site-readiness.asp](http://www.considerthecarolinas.com/site-readiness.asp)

4) Mississippi Power's Project Ready Program. The Project Ready Certified Sites Program identifies appropriate sites for attracting new manufacturing, warehouse/distribution facilities,

and high technology industries to southeast Mississippi. Currently there are five certified sites in this territory and several of the sites are located near the John C. Stennis Space Center. This program has five different site categories: Mega Site, Large Industrial, General Industrial, Industrial Park and Technology Park with an apparent emphasis on the aviation and aerospace sectors. McCallum Sweeney Consulting is the third party validation entity.

[www.projectreadysite.com/index2.php](http://www.projectreadysite.com/index2.php)

5) Entergy Arkansas Select Site Program. The Select Site Program that serves Entergy's Arkansas communities currently has 16 sites with one of those sites sold. Deloitte Consulting certifies the sites for Entergy and sites range from 40 acres to sites with over 2,000 acres. One of the sites located in Marion, Arkansas was twice considered, over the last ten years, for possible Toyota plants that ultimately went to San Antonio, Texas and Tupelo, Mississippi. Since 2005, Select Site has created over 2,000 jobs and a capital investment of \$335 million.

[http://www.entergy-arkansas.com/economic\\_development/select\\_sites.aspx](http://www.entergy-arkansas.com/economic_development/select_sites.aspx)

6) Alabama's AdvantageSite. The Alabama AdvantageSite program is jointly sponsored by Alabama Power Company, The Alabama Development Office, Alabama Gas Corporation, the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA), North Alabama Industrial Association and PowerSouth Energy Cooperative. The basic criteria is a minimum of 25 buildable acres and submittals can only be made by a recognized local economic development entity. As of June 2010, there have been 20 certified sites enrolled in this program.

[www.edpa.org/bsc/advantagesitepublic.asp](http://www.edpa.org/bsc/advantagesitepublic.asp)

7) Georgia's GRAD Sites Program. GRAD stands for Guaranteed Ready for Accelerated Development and was established by Georgia Allies, a consortium of public and private entities

including AT&T, Delta Airlines, Georgia Power, EGS, GEMC and the Georgia Department of Economic Development. Currently, there are 15 sites in the GRAD inventory. A minimum of 50 buildable acres is required and submittal of proposed site must be done by a local community or a recognized economic development organization and the submittal must in turn be selected by the Georgia Allies. The Georgia Allies have retained Business Facility Planning Consultants as the third party certifier. [www.locationgeorgia.com/GRAD\\_Sites.php](http://www.locationgeorgia.com/GRAD_Sites.php)

8) Oklahoma's Site Ready Program. The Oklahoma Department of Commerce, in partnership with PSO and OG&E, has implemented what some consider being one of the most rigorous site certification programs in the country. The inventory of certified sites has close to 30 sites ranging from 9 acres to 490 acres and all sites are build-ready with all utilities in place or pre-permitted and planned. All selected Site Ready sites are categorized into one of eight categories, e.g. Mega Park, Aerospace Park, Heavy Industrial Park, Light Industrial Park, Warehouse/Distribution Park, Business Services Park, Research and Development Park and Rural Business/Commerce Park. <http://tinyurl.com/4vo495r9>

9) South Carolina Power Team and Santee Cooper's Certified Sites Program. Twenty seven sites are certified in South Carolina. There are three sites in the 1,200 acre range in and around Sumter and Florence, South Carolina, including the Black River Airport Industrial Park, 1300 acres, the I-95 Mega Site at 1,400 acres and the Young Lands Industrial site which is over 1,400 acres. Sites range from 50 to 1,500 acres in size. <http://tinyurl.com/4me3cnq>

10) Louisiana Economic Development Site Certification Program. Albeit a young program relative to the previously cited programs Louisiana Economic Development has a new certified

sites program that includes the River Chase development in the Madisonville/Covington area.

<http://www.louisianasiteselection.com/led/buildings-and-sites.aspx>

## **VI. Summary and Conclusion**

Site certification is a method of reducing the risk for a prospect.

Site certification facilitates the speed-to-market aspect that is required by today's prospects when they are in the site selection mode and it mitigates the prospect's risk relative to selecting not only the best site based on the prospect's needs but a pre-certified site provides a prospect a clear and unobstructed view of what will be required to begin building on a site. What needs to be done, who will do it and how much will it cost. A site certification program will identify sites that are available, fully served and developable.

"Shovel Ready" and "Certified Site" are not necessarily interchangeable terms and it is important to distinguish between the two. A certified site will give the prospect most of the information needed to quickly determine what has been done, what needs to be done, who will do it, how much it will cost and who will pay for it and how soon the prospect can begin building.

The St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation has worked on many site selection projects with numerous prospects, oftentimes in partnership with Cleco Power LLC's Economic Development department and have experienced first-hand the ever increasing need to have sites where all due diligence and verification has been performed, vis-à-vis, the need to have sites that are pre-certified. The time frames that are demanded by the prospect today are much shorter and the turnaround times from when the RFP is received to when the prospect needs a site submitted are becoming is becoming a matter of days instead of weeks.

The need for economic development organizations, community, region or state have a suitable inventory of certified sites will only proportionately increase relative to the speed-to-market needs of the prospect.

Site certification does not certify a site's quality, only the ability of the site to limit the risk to a potential prospect.

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