

Green buildings a hit with owners and occupants

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The Ottawa Paramedic Service headquarters is shown in a recent photo. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Fred Chartrand

OTTAWA - In the lobby of the Ottawa Paramedic Service headquarters, you're more likely to be struck by the amount of natural light pouring in through the skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows than the tiny round plaque at the entranceway.

But the plaque, a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, is the building's crown jewel.

Awarded Ottawa's first LEED certification, the "green" building employs a multitude of conservation measures: motion sensors, low-flow water fixtures, recycled materials, and high-efficiency boilers, pumps and fans.

It all adds up to big savings - and perhaps a healthier workplace.

Such buildings are at the vanguard of the country's green construction movement, with plenty more in the works.

The paramedic headquarters delivers energy savings of nearly 31 per cent, or \$80,000, a year over traditional designs, according to the city's operation summaries.

Water-saving initiatives alone decrease consumption by almost 45 per cent

"The air quality is great and the end product is that it's saving tonnes of money," said Jean-Pierre Trottier, public education information officer for the paramedic service.

Although the initial cost of environment-and people-friendly construction can be higher than traditional buildings, it's worth it, said property manager Dulka McLellan.

"There's supposed to be a payout of 3.8 years of the investment, which is fairly aggressive, and I think that we're going to be able to see that," McLellan said.

"It's performed incredibly well and in monitoring the monthly and annual costs, it continues to perform better than what we originally expected."

Bike racks, a gym and shower facilities are provided for the new building's appreciative occupants. Underneath the snow lie plants with medical uses like St. John's Wort and Echinacea.

Formal studies on illness and absenteeism have yet to be conducted at the building, but some occupants say they have noticed a difference in their health.

"In the two years that I have been here I have not fallen to illness at all," said McLellan. "And I have to say I probably feel a lot more energized. Certainly the air quality is significantly better than what I've experienced in the past."

The city of Ottawa now has a green building policy which requires that municipal buildings take energy and environmental impacts into account.

And the federal government is going green, too, although environmental groups say it can do better.

Pierre Guevremont of Natural Resources Canada said any new federal building must conform to LEED's gold standard.

He added that a number of federal government programs collaborate with non-governmental organizations like the Canada Green Building Council, which issues the LEED awards, to promote energy-efficient buildings.

But Roger Peters of the Pembina Institute said the federal programs are only designed to assist small-scale buildings. And he said the Conservative government has cut programs intended to provide financial support to green buildings.

"They maintained some sort of information exchange and other support for green buildings and retrofitted buildings, but there are no government incentive programs for either retrofitting buildings or supporting new buildings, except for small businesses," he said.

Experts say the government needs to impose more stringent building codes, more exchange programs for inefficient appliances, and financing options to cover the extra costs of going green.

Richard Williams, a vice-president at the architectural firm HOK which designs LEED-certified facilities, said the benefits of green building are too great to ignore.

"There are studies that have shown that the quality of environment can actually help improve productivity, employer retention, reduce the amount of workplace-related illnesses."

And he said the federal government could get things moving faster by taking more of a leadership role.

"I think there's definitely room for the government to move in terms of legislation and the environment," he said.

"In the green building industry we've heard a lot about greening the White House, but I haven't heard a lot about greening Parliament Hill. Clearly that would be a really important move."