On a Mission to Save the Environment

By Duncan Stewart

With a goal of becoming one of the most environmentally friendly missions in the world, the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C., has worked to do everything possible to make its operations more sustainable.

In the early days there were motion sensors to turn lights off when offices weren't being used and bins for recycling paper, cans and plastic throughout the building. Then the mission bought more fuel-efficient cars and vans for its fleet. By 2006, the chancery and the official residence were running on power from wind-generated sources. Today, through a wide-ranging retrofit, the post is realizing more than $300,000 in annual energy savings.

The retrofit project, under the careful eye of sustainable development specialist Marc Lalonde and DFAIT's Sustainable Buildings Program, has included measures ranging from replacing lightbulbs with more energy-efficient ones to installing variable-speed drives on motors that control the flow of air within the building.

"It's been a remarkable transformation," says Sally Wade, who heads the physical resources team at the embassy and chairs the Embassy Greening Committee. Mission staff at each stage "have really pushed to take our efforts to the next level," Wade says. For example, "it's been extremely helpful" to have the backing of Ambassador Gary Doer, and "our intern program provides us with a steady stream of motivated young people with lots of great ideas," she says. "They keep us on our toes."

At an embassy, such initiatives can suffer when rotations occur, but "new staff have immediately recognized how important it is to be at the forefront of greening efforts and to symbolize Canada's commitment to sustainability," Wade adds.

Recent greening efforts have included planting a vegetable garden on the chancery rooftop, introducing embassy composting, providing staff with bicycles to use on trips to meetings or lunches and expanding the recycling program throughout the building.

"Even better, we've shown that it's possible to reduce the mission's environmental footprint without increasing costs," Wade says. Indeed, herbs and vegetables from the garden are bought by staff and used in the cafeteria, the bicycles were financed by the sale of an old fleet vehicle, and used office paper is sold to recycling firms at a profit.

A number of additional measures are being considered, including pursuing Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for the building. LEED is a globally recognized rating system for green buildings, based on such criteria as water and energy efficiency, building materials and air quality.

While the greening program has reduced the embassy's costs and environmental footprint, communicating its success has further enhanced its value. "When someone walks into our building and we can tell them we buy 100-percent wind power, it has an immediate impact on their perception of our workplace—and of Canada generally," Wade says.

The mission is an active member of the D.C. Greening Embassies Forum, launched by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, where the city's embassies share best practices in sustainable operations—and enjoy a little healthy competition. Wade hopes the efforts can also serve as a template for Canadian missions around the world.

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For more information, visit www.washington.gc.ca and click on "Greening the Embassy."

For an overview of how the department is making our buildings more energy efficient and environment-friendly, read Marc Lalonde's article "Green is the New Black" at Our World Online.