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U-M aims to save on energy Planet Blue campaign launched to cut costs

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Burdened by skyrocketing prices for utilities that cost \$111 million last year, the University of Michigan is rolling out a campus-wide energy savings campaign that marries high-technology with old-fashioned reminders on how to conserve.

To make the campus greener and save money, devices like motion sensors will be installed in some rooms to turn off lights and devices automatically. Low-flow faucets and dual flush toilets will become more common. But that's just a start.

Called Planet Blue, the campaign's goal of reducing total university spending on utilities by 10 percent and increasing recycling won't be achieved without lots of help from the university's employees.

They're being asked to be vigilant about turning off their office or classroom lights when they're not occupied and to put up with more inconveniences. U-M wants to adjust building heating and air-conditioning systems for a wider variation in temperatures, and to avoid running them fully at night or on weekends. The target temperatures are 68 degrees in the winter and 76 in the summer. So employees will be asked to dress for the season by wearing lighter clothing in the summer, and yes, bringing sweaters to work in the winter.

Planet Blue starts with detailed and technical evaluations of campus buildings by university staff, assisted by a consultant and DTE Energy. They'll recommend ways the buildings can function more energy efficiently. Over the three years of the campaign, those Planet Blue teams will evaluate 90 of the largest buildings on campus. Then they'll appeal to the environmental conscience of the employees.

"When people are more aware of the impact they can have, and the cost and the impact on the environment, they're more willing to change their behavior," said Kris Kolevar, the Planet Blue project manager.

There's room for savings. In the past, some campus buildings have been lighted and had their heating and cooling systems running all the time, every day.

U-M projects to recoup its \$5 million a year budget for the campaign within two years of its completion by saving money on utilities costs.

While many homeowners and renters are feeling the pinch of rising costs of utilities, the university feels the rising costs acutely because of its sheer size and the type of equipment it uses. It has more than 14 million square feet of facilities space that contains thousands of computers and other pieces of energy-thirsty equipment for classrooms, laboratories and offices.

Rising costs of utilities like electricity, natural gas, and water are now regularly cited as a significant challenge when the U-M Board of Regents meets in the summer to set tuition rates. U-M President Mary Sue Coleman bluntly told the regents two years ago that utility costs were "killing us."

Planet Blue has already had some success. A pilot effort in chemistry, space research, Rackham, Fleming and Institute for Social Research buildings led to greater savings than expected. The buildings were selected because they are representative of the different types of facilities spaces on campus.

"Our original expectation was that we would find maybe 3 to 5 percent energy savings," said Richard Robben, executive director of the U-M plant operations office, which is conducting Planet Blue.

"As we got into the buildings and really engaged the community ... they were much more flexible in responding to some of the ideas that we were coming up with - that we were seeing energy savings in some of the buildings that were approaching 20 percent," he said.

In the chemistry building, occupancy sensors were installed on fume hoods that had operated continuously, even if nobody was working in the laboratories. That move will save \$200,000 a year. A computer server room was relocated from the basement of Fleming to a climate-controlled data center in an adjacent building, cutting Fleming's utility bill by \$97,000 a year. Cutting the operating hours of the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning fans in ISR is expected to save \$80,000 a year. Occupancy and daylight sensors are recommended for installation on the lights in six common areas at Rackham, which is projected to save \$13,000 a year.

"People are extraordinarily accepting of the idea," said Anuja Mudali, the program's communications specialist. "They're excited to be part of something. Being green is a hot topic now. It gets to be a little bit difficult when they have to actually make some change, or give up a little bit of comfort for a little bit of savings. That's where we're trying to work with them."

After the Planet Blue teams conduct evaluations of the buildings, they meet with building managers, deans, chairpersons and other bosses who use the buildings. Individual schools have an incentive to participate fully because they can reinvest any savings from lower utilities costs in their academic operations. Then the Planet Blue teams hold open houses, where employees receive information on the program, including detailed data on their building's energy use and costs, and they're told how they can help.

Just keeping lights off in a single classroom while it's unoccupied is projected to save the university \$40 a year.

"Most people don't know how much their building is spending on utilities," said Mudali. "Most people are just floored by it."

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