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Banking on Green Solutions.

By Douglas A. Bowen

For those involved in property management of any sort in New England, the significance of “location” is understood. One of the challenges of simply being located in the region is that you have to deal with high energy costs. Partly due to its location in the Connecticut River Valley, PeoplesBank, a community bank based in Holyoke, Mass., has derived some tangible benefits from the region’s natural resources and manufacturing heritage. Well over a century ago, the planners of Holyoke, Mass., saw fit to tap into the Connecticut River for power. Today, 60 percent of the energy used to power PeoplesBank’s facilities in the town comes from clean, renewable hydroelectricity.

Being located next to one of the region’s largest rivers is not always an option. For more comprehensive energy savings and conservation measure, PeoplesBank has embarked on an organization-wide green effort, similar to what many communities and multilocation businesses are considering or undertaking currently. The bank’s efforts to become more responsible to its communities and local environments have been under way for several years and the valuable lessons learned are worth passing along to those interested in embarking on a similar quest.

Before addressing the practical nuts and bolts of an organization’s journey to become greener, a quick review of the possibilities that have been discovered is warranted. As mentioned above, the bank started with an advantage: Several of its locations are able to tap into hydroelectric power. PeoplesBank has been an active supporter of hydroelectric generation. A few years ago, the bank provided Holyoke Gas & Electric with approximately \$6 million in financing to upgrade hydroelectric equipment and increase capacity.

That source of clean energy may not be available to many organizations, but that fact should not deter you from contemplating the ideal of finding a renewable energy source. It certainly did not deter the town of Princeton, Mass., which, several decades ago, decided as a community to build its own renewable-energy sources. More recently, PeoplesBank put together a \$6.5 million loan package to upgrade the town’s wind farm. The new wind farm will consist of two 1,500-kilowatt wind turbines that will eventually generate enough renewable and cost-effective electricity to meet 40 percent of the town’s energy requirements, or the equivalent energy consumption of approximately 800 homes, once it’s completed this fall.

Generating Buzz

Turning internally, PeoplesBank started an organization-wide energy audit several years ago. The data from that effort gave the bank the ability to map out its energy-improvement initiatives building by building. Today, the benefits of those investments are being seen at a time when energy costs are skyrocketing. The bank started with four offices, where more than 1,000 fixtures were replaced with lighting and ballasts that are more efficient. Heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems in the buildings also were improved, resulting in significant savings in natural gas, oil and electricity costs. To date, the bank is realizing an annual savings of between 12 percent and 25 percent, depending on the building and the type of energy consumed.

Energy-improvement efforts have a long way to go, as many other buildings must be audited and renovated in such a manner. But PeoplesBank certainly has been bitten by the green bug. Its involvement in financing clean-energy generation facilities and the cost savings realized through its energy-conservation efforts has created an excitement throughout the organization, along with the data to support future investments. As a result, PeoplesBank is embarking on some significant next steps that will pave the way for an even greater impact.

Recently, the bank completed an organization-wide survey of employees to generate new ideas for conservation, recycling and customer education. The supportive and enthusiastic feedback it has received so far provided the bank with several new ideas, which it is researching for possible implementation. The bank plans to launch its first green product – an essentially paperless checking account – in an effort to involve its customer base in being responsible to the community and the environment. In the near future, a director of environmental affairs will be appointed and be supported by a volunteer committee. The new director will research, implement and supervise future conservation efforts throughout the bank and the community. Operational methods also will continue to be examined and improved in an effort to create an integrated approach to energy conservation, recycling, and customer and employee education.

While you might not have direct access to hydroelectricity or a wind farm in your community, opportunities for saving energy and conserving resources are all around you – most likely in places you have not even contemplated looking yet. In fact, most electric power utilities offer consumers the option to purchase their power from clean renewable sources. To get started, an energy audit is crucial, as it provides a pragmatic plan to upgrade facilities and recoup investment in the near term. Going green is not only a responsible course of action, but one that will yield great results as well.

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