

SRJC Aims To Be Model of Sustainability, Thanks to Measure H Support

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By Bob Padecky

Sustainability, one of the eight core objectives of SRJC's master building plan, is not a concept lacking enthusiasm or direction. It is, literally, boots on the ground, specifically David Liebman's boots.

Liebman, the school's coordinator and consultant on energy and sustainability, spent the night before Thanksgiving going to every building on the downtown campus. He had sent out a flyer, in fact three of them, over the previous week. He asked all college employees to turn off every appliance in their office for the holiday.

"So I did an audit," Liebman said. "I walked the campus to see what was unplugged and what wasn't unplugged. I found about 60 percent of all appliances were unplugged. People forgot about their monitors. Many didn't unplug their microwaves. A lot of printers weren't turned off. We want to make this (saving energy) a habit."

Sustainability, for Liebman and sustainability co-chairs Robert Ethington and Alexa Forrester, is not an idea that can wait or one that can be approached casually.

From the earliest planning stages of Measure H, sustainability was considered a critical element in the planning process. But advocating for sustainability and asking the Board to make a financial commitment were two separate issues. It wasn't until Vice President of Business and Finance Doug Roberts connected the dots by suggesting that a photovoltaic field would lower the District's energy bill and reduce the District's carbon footprint at the same time. Dr. Chong dubbed the idea "going green to save green." The Board embraced the idea and committed \$32 million of the \$410 million bond to sustainability projects.

"I tell my students," said Ethington, a professor of social change and dean of student affairs and engagement programs, "it's changing the way we live so future generations can have similar lifestyles. We use too many nonrenewable resources. It's about respect. It's not just about me. It's everyone else and the generations that are coming after."

Some changes already have taken place on campus. Forrester, a professor in the philosophy, humanities and religion department, calls it "the low-hanging fruit." The name belies its long-term significance – a bicycle barn and water bottle filling stations.

The on-campus bicycle barn, ideally, would be a repair shop and a secure storage facility. Discouraging theft, video surveillance would monitor all activity. The barn

would protect bicycles from inclement weather. One water bottle filling station is already located in the Bertolini Center.

“Our plan is to have a water bottle filling station on every floor in every building,” Ethington said. Fewer plastic bottles discarded means reduced carbon imprint.

“It’s the college’s largest volume amount of landfill waste,” Liebman said. “Not to mention the college spends a good chunk of change on paper towels each year.” It’s simple: dollars saved on paper towels mean more funds available to support the fundamental activity of teaching students.

In place of paper towels, the college wants to install hand dryers. The hand dryers, the bike barn and the water bottle filling stations serve as reminders, subtle or otherwise, that SRJC is making a strong commitment to going (and saving) green.

What impresses SRJC’s faculty is the level of student involvement. The bike barn, the hand dryers and the water bottle filling stations were all student-generated ideas.

“Students can come here and make a difference,” Ethington said. “They have left a legacy.”

The solar panels to be constructed over the parking areas of the Petaluma campus will be another obvious reminder to students, parents and faculty of the benefits of sustainability, made possible by the Measure H bond.

“The Petaluma campus has large amount of parking,” Liebman said. “The benefit of solar (beyond illumination at night) is it actually reflects heat that is otherwise absorbed in the asphalt which then reflects back to campus. So then the buildings need more electricity to cool themselves down.”

According to Liebman, installing solar panels on existing structures is financially prohibitive. That, however, won’t be the case when the Shuhaw and Bech science buildings are razed to the ground. The chemistry building doesn’t even have a restroom in it. The new science building will have glass walls for students to see the plumbing, as an example, that shows toilets being refilled, not with drinking water, but with recycled water.

“We call it a living learning environment for the students,” said Liebman, reflecting an education beyond the classroom.

The learning curve can begin with something as simple as changing a light bulb. “You’d be surprised,” Liebman said, “about the number of places on campus in which you have to build scaffolding to replace a light bulb.”

The Burbank Auditorium, the first full building to be remodeled under Measure H, poses a unique challenge in blending the traditional exterior with a state of the art

interior, particularly as it relates to energy conservation. New LED lights and a state of the art theater technology system will drive the magic behind the scenes. Most importantly, the mechanical and electrical systems will be upgraded and the District has set a goal of attaining “zero-net energy” status for the project. Tiered seating will be installed, not to mention an increase in the women’s restrooms, which now number four and create long lines at intermissions. Moreover, the District will utilize a “dual plumbing system,” using water from an underground spring to flush toilets and run the mechanical systems, thus reducing the need for fresh water from the City system.

Quite possibly the most innovative design is how the Pioneer building will be heated and cooled. The next-door Bertolini Center is temperature controlled by a below-ground geothermal system. The plan is to connect Bertolini and Pioneer with tubing “using temperature in the ground,” Liebman said. “It doesn’t require any natural gas for heating and it uses a minimal amount of electricity for cooling.”

The goal for SRJC is to make its downtown campus achieve zero net energy by the 2030 state mandate, meaning the college makes as much energy as it uses.

“We’re trying not to do it all in 2029,” Ethington joked. “But we want to be a model of sustainability. A plan means nothing unless you can show it. Our actions have everything to do with our credibility as an institution. Vision means nothing. We have to walk the talk. We have to show it. And we will.”