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Shades of Green

By Cynthia Barnett - 1/1/2008

Built by railroad magnate Henry Plant, the Belleview Biltmore Hotel spans 21 acres overlooking Clearwater Bay. It's one of the largest wooden structures in the world. The 110-year-old Victorian landmark was in danger of being demolished until management asset firm Legg Mason bought it last year for \$30 million.

The firm has committed to renovating the hotel according to U.S. Green Building Council LEED standards, and the \$100-million facelift will maintain the hotel's National Register of Historic Places designation while meeting goals to save water and energy and reduce the carbon emissions that lead to global warming.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who unveiled his "climate friendly initiatives" last year, lauded Legg Mason for its "tremendous leadership" on green building. Indeed, across the state, the commercial real estate industry leads Florida businesses on the green path, says Charles Kibert, a building-construction professor at the University of Florida and leading expert in the field.

Florida governments, too, are embracing green, making buildings and vehicles more energy efficient. So are private companies, particularly those that can achieve significant economies of scale. Delray Beach-based Office Depot overhauled lighting and energy in 600 stores, contributing not only to the bottom line, but also to a 10% decline in the release of heat-trapping emissions. Lakeland-based Publix has cut its use of electricity by an average of 7% overall and 23% in its new stores.

But while many Florida business and governments are undergoing environmental tuneups to meet consumer demand and forthcoming mandates, others are backing away from green initiatives in response to economic conditions. Some home builders, struggling to survive mounting financial losses and a glut of unsold homes, are axing green-building programs to shave costs. Bonita Springs-based WCI Communities, a green champion during the state's real estate run-up ["Green Greens," page 18], had more homes certified green than any other builder in the state, according to the Florida Green Building Coalition. But after posting a third-quarter loss of \$70 million last year, WCI backed off plans to certify more homes and slashed its green-building staff as it laid off more than 500 employees.

Meanwhile, too many companies still see green as just a marketing tool rather than a commitment to keeping Florida — and the planet — livable. Witness the mounds of press releases for green products, green public relations, even a green insurance agent, with little hint of what makes the companies sustainable. One national home builder has a "buy green" ad campaign in Florida even though its houses have few discernible green features. "There's certainly an effort to take advantage of the greening of our society. It's caveat emptor, buyer beware," says Tim Center, director of the Council for Sustainable Florida, a public-private alliance that encourages sustainable development practices.

During a speech last fall at the University of Florida, L. Hunter Lovins, founder of Natural Capitalism Solutions, who is helping multinational corporations from Wal-Mart to Royal Dutch Shell become more sustainable, defined "green-washing" as "spending more time and money on talking about sustainability than doing it." Still, she says, talking is often the first step.

How to discern the green-washers? Center says companies and governments with the most serious conservation efforts often have an online sustainability report that consumers can look to for data, from reductions in water and energy use to investments in clean technology. With the green movement in full swing, this year's Industry Outlook edition focuses on green trends, starting with a look at a dozen efforts, large and small, private and public, that could make a real difference.

Energy

» **Florida Atlantic University's Center of Excellence in Ocean Energy Technology**, Dania Beach

FAU won a \$5-million grant from the state to test whether the powerful Gulf Stream off the coast of south Florida — the planet's largest ocean current — might someday generate electricity for Florida homes and businesses. As early as next month, FAU scientists will direct a large turbine into the Atlantic Ocean to conduct tests — lasting from less than a day to more than a month — to monitor energy-harvesting potential, environmental impacts and other issues.

» **Green Power Systems**, Jacksonville

Green Power's planned garbage-to-electricity plant in Tallahassee could significantly reduce the amount of waste sent to

landfills. The 200,000-sq.-ft. energy plant will convert 1,000 tons of Leon County municipal solid waste daily into 42 megawatts of electricity. The city will in turn buy 35 megawatts, enough to supply electricity to 22,000 homes. The system relies on a technology called plasma gasification vitrification. Plasma torches heat the organic matter in a 5,000-degree-Celsius reactor to produce a synthetic fuel. Founder Ingo Krieg says he hopes construction will begin in August and that the plant will be online in August 2010. Along roughly the same time frame, St. Lucie County is working with an Atlanta firm called Geoplasma to build a \$425-million plasma gasification facility that county officials hope will someday empty their landfill and power homes in the county.

Retailers

» **Publix**, Lakeland

Publix has achieved significant energy and recycling goals over the past five years, though the company has kept them fairly quiet, with nary a press release crowing about results. In 2001, the company launched Get into a Green Routine, its program to engage all 143,000 associates in reducing energy use and increasing recycling. Since then, it has reduced electricity costs by 7% in all stores and 23% in new stores. A more aggressive program is planned this year; adding doors to open-air milk and dairy cases will save 75% of energy used per case. Changing just the wattage of lighting on the sales floors will net a 10% energy savings per store with no additional cost. The company also has committed to stocking its stores with local foods when possible — it spent \$700 million on fresh Florida foods last year — and has put 75 hybrids on the road, with more to come.

» **Office Depot**, Delray Beach

Office Depot made an initial financial commitment of more than \$20 million toward energy efficiency in 2006, including retrofitting its entire chain to T5 high-output fluorescent lighting. The company saved \$6.2 million in electricity costs the first year alone. "This far exceeded our expectations," says spokeswoman Melissa Perlman. Meanwhile, the company has switched out its fleet of delivery vehicles from box trucks to ultra-low-emission "sprinter" trucks, which are 40% more fuel-efficient. This and other transportation initiatives have reduced transportation costs and fuel consumption 30%, with a 10% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Water

» **ASR Systems**, Gainesville

Aquifer Storage Recovery (ASR) is a method of storing water during floods to recover later during times of water shortage. Water is stored deep underground through wells, eliminating the need for large, costly (some say environmentally destructive) reservoirs. ASR Systems President David Pyne literally wrote the book on ASR and helps install systems around the world. Florida has been storing water in ASRs since 1983, but the practice remains controversial here. Nevertheless, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan calls for more than 300 ASR wells. If Pyne and his colleagues prove their technology safe for Florida, ASR could go a long way toward solving the state's water-supply problems — as well as the global water crisis.

» **AquaFiber**, Winter Park

This biotechnology company uses algae, a proprietary flow-way system and ozonation to remove harmful nutrients from water. AquaFiber last year won a pay-for-performance contract, the first of its kind for the St. Johns River Water Management District, to remove phosphorus from Lake Jesup in central Florida. The company will receive \$500,000 annually if it can remove at least one metric ton of phosphorus a year from the impaired lake for the next five years. CEO Tom Bland says ongoing tests at Lake Apopka indicate the company will be able to do much better. Besides cleaning up pollution, applications for AquaFiber's technology could include urban water supply and environmental restoration. Meanwhile, AquaFiber is studying its algal byproduct as a potential biofuel, as well as for carbon sequestration — the long-term storage of carbon to keep it out of the atmosphere.

Government

» **Miami**

To say that Miami lacks a green reputation is an understatement. The city has one of the worst air-pollution rankings in the country and is among the most wasteful water consumers in the state. In response, Mayor Manny Diaz has laid out a plan for Miami to become one of the greenest cities in America. His Miami 21 vision encompasses more public transportation, green building, a green fleet of vehicles for the city, a climate-protection agreement and an Office of Sustainable Initiatives, among other projects. A new water-conservation program is under way, as is an effort to restore the city's tree canopy cover by a minimum of 30% by 2020.

» **Pinellas County/St. Petersburg**

The densest county in Florida, with little land left on which to grow, has a well-deserved reputation for environmental stewardship. The county has a model water-reuse program. St. Petersburg tracks sustainability indicators, including water use, energy use and solid-waste generation, to measure progress over time.

Home Builders

» **Mercedes Homes**, Melbourne

Despite Florida's housing downturn that has some competitors backing off green building, Mercedes Homes is pushing ahead to build water- and energy-saving homes. A new home in Brevard County's Eagle Harbor has the highest rating from the St. Johns River Water Management District's Florida Water Star Program; it will use 40% to 60% less water than the average Florida home.

» **K2 Urban Corp.**, Tallahassee

Builder and developer David Wamsley, CEO of K2 Urban Corp., has pledged that going forward all of his company's homes will meet strict new standards unveiled in November by the U.S. Green Building Council. The company is in the second phase of its \$80-million Evening Rose development, a classic infill project inside Tallahassee's Capital Circle.

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