

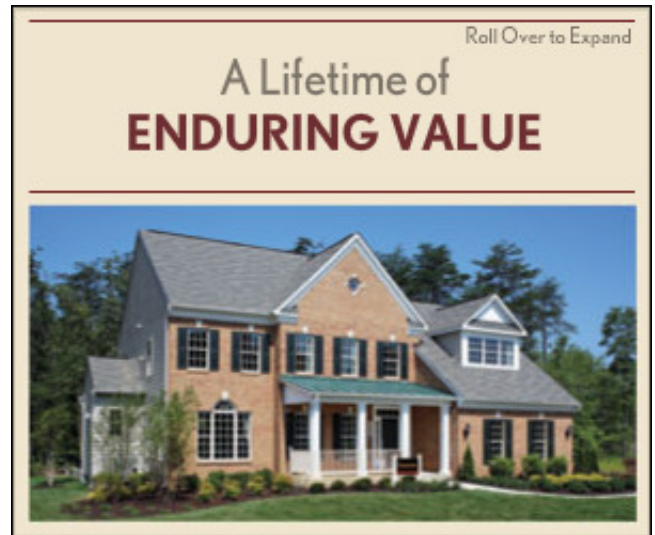
The Washington Post

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Prince George's making some strides in becoming green

By Akeya Dickson, Wednesday,
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It's not quite second nature yet, but students at Barack Obama Elementary School are bringing their environmentally focused educational experience home.



“We’ve had parents say that they’re children tell them to turn the lights off if they’re not in a room or this bag can be reused,” said Principal Pearl Harmon, who heads the energy-efficient school.

First opening its doors this school year, the Upper Marlboro school just celebrated being the second in the county — and the sixth in the state of Maryland — to be awarded a Gold LEED Certification. And although the county isn’t where it wants to be in terms of reaching fully functional green status, steps like these have it heading in that direction.

“We are focusing a lot of attention on transit-oriented development that reduces the amount of driving we do,” said Council member Eric Olson (D-College Park). “We’re really making a push for the Purple Line Light Rail. We’re focusing on these environmental issues, but we can always do better.”

Olson recently proposed legislation for an advisory board to the Prince George’s County Council that would grant tax credits to businesses that go green and to create environmentally friendly jobs. The council has juggled tightening budgets, which resulted in cutting the annual Prince George’s County GreenFest last year. It’s unclear whether the festival will resume this year.

“We think that growing our green economy is a great way to get more jobs to the county and enhance redevelopment,” he said. “We’re going through the budget now, so we’re looking at possibly having someone in the county that would audit our county’s energies and other issues.”

Olson asserts that there’s a lot of interest among residents and elected officials to tackle environmental issues within the county just as much as there is for improving education and lowering the crime rate.

“You can’t look at it as either/or,” he said. “There’s a lot of interest among elected officials to move our sustainability, environmental initiatives and safeguard our water, air and land alongside everything else.”

The Anacostia Watershed Society works with 15,000 volunteers a year throughout the District, Montgomery and Prince George's to pick up trash and remove invasive plant species, among other projects along the Anacostia River.

Volunteers recently planted 80 trees off the northwest branch of the river in Hyattsville. About 400 more will be planted by the end of the year, said Eric Sibley, the society's director of stewardship. Sibley works with children in classrooms and on the river to help them understand why the Anacostia is a great resource and what needs to be done to clean it.

The District and Montgomery County "are being superstars" about cleaning up the river, he said; Prince George's County, however, is "kicking and dragging."

The society's first State of the Anacostia River Report gives Prince George's a failing grade.

"They need to do the most, and so far, they have done the least," said Brent Bolin, the society's advocacy director. He said that 90 percent of the county's streams are considered degraded by state officials.

Prince George's tabled its plan to address harmful stormwater run-off last year, but Bolin said he hoped County Executive Rushern L. Baker III (D) will find a way to pass the legislation. He said that county leaders have tried to include green building initiatives in planning efforts, but developers have refused.

Other projects the county has underway include the installation of cool roofs and solar panels and the rehabilitation of public housing, according to a report from Prince George's County Goes Green Steering Committee that was issued last summer. The projects will be funded with \$6.6 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Included in the county's "Five Goals to Go Green" is a push for a 20 percent reduction of the 2007 energy consumption in all existing county buildings by 2015.

Through contracts with Pepco Energy Services and Johnson Controls, two qualified Energy Service companies, the county has implemented comprehensive energy efficiency programs for the Largo Government Center, the Hyattsville Justice Center and eight other county buildings.

The work, which included water conservation, lighting upgrades and cooling system replacements, resulted in \$656,698 in savings from January 2009 to June last year.

Other efforts establish incentives for new county and public school buildings, as well as new and existing private commercial buildings, to achieve a LEED Silver or equivalent rating under a green building performance measure.

"We're not going to see those total cost savings in the first year, especially in these tight budget times," said Pearl Harmon of the county's green efforts. "But we'll begin to see that we're actually saving funds, from light bills to the water system, over time."

Staff writer Christy Goodman contributed to this report.

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