

## 'Green' features in new county highway shop

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, April 22, 2014 8:57 am

JEFFERSON — When the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors approved spending \$15 million to build a new Highway Department shop, most members were clear they wanted the county to get the “most bang for their buck.”

One way to do that, according to many, is to design the project as sustainably as possible, saving energy in the long run and reducing the project’s environmental up-front footprint. The supervisors agreed, and the building’s current design includes over two-dozen different “green” features throughout the 92,000 square-foot building.

County Administrator Ben Wehmeier, who took over the project upon assuming his post in July 2013, said the benefits of including sustainable features in the project were obvious, even though they can cost more up front.

“I think it’s two-fold. Obviously you’re looking at opportunities for return on investment, where you can utilize sustainable design to help with the long-term ongoing operating costs,” he said. “And the second thing is, just in general, it’s a best management practice. We’re looking at ways to reduce our footprints, as well as everyone else.”

Though the building will not be certified “green” through the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) system, the project’s designers are using many of the products and processes that help keep the construction sustainable.

Some of the ways they will do that are through using thicker insulation to reduce heating and cooling costs, maintenance-free concrete wall panels, flooring made with recycled content, and low-flow restroom fixtures.

In addition, much of the building’s base will be made up on the crushed rubble from the former Countryside Home, which was demolished right on the same property earlier this year. That will reduce the cost, manufacturing footprint and transportation of that portion of the project to almost nothing.

In perhaps one of the most visible energy-saving features of the new building, much of the structure will be lit through tubular skylights, which will help distribute natural sunlight throughout the space, nearly eliminating the need for artificial light much of the time.

County Supervisor Greg Dav id, chair of the county’s Sustainability Taskforce, said he was pleased with the county’s efforts to incorporate energy-saving technologies into the final design.

“I think those new features are absolutely wonderful, and I think they did a great job in trying to get as much of that in to a building like we’re building as is practical,” he said. “We could have put a few more things in, but all in all those features — the skylights, the extra insulation, some of the LEED certification standards that we’re meeting — are outstanding.”

One of the major disappointments of the project for many is the lack of an alternative energy initiative. This project, as one of the county’s largest infrastructure expenditures in decades, will help set the tone and standards for construction projects in the coming years, which led many to push for a green energy source, believing it could save money and shape future county policy.

“There was some debate about geothermal,” said Wehmeier, referring to drilling deep into the Earth to harness the planet’s own energy for heating and cooling. “As part of that, the engineers on the project team put together some numbers to show the current costs of actually putting the facilities in and the long-term operational costs, and the conversation was that it wasn’t a wise investment at this point in time.”

Others on the Sustainability Taskforce made a late push to power the building through county-grown biomass, or plants that are grown locally and burned for fuel. That discussion was tabled due to the difficult logistics, but it might be explored again later for smaller projects.

“I think Jefferson County has an excellent opportunity to utilize biomass,” said David, noting benefits such as being a clean-burning energy source and keeping spending and production local. “Biomass offers a lot for our communities.”

Though no one knows exactly what the future holds, Wehmeier said the county will continue to look for ways to improve its environmental footprint, both in large projects and everyday.

“I just think it’s an exciting project. We want to keep looking at other options as we move forward in terms of how we use design projects such as these in the future, as well as the things we do on a day-to-day basis,” he said.

“Changing out lightbulbs are simple things we can do that are positive for sustainability, but also for energy costs and the taxpayers as well.”