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Square meets environmental gold standard

Design Property one of 18 in Canada to achieve prestigious energy designation

APRIL ROBINSON
TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Over the course of two years, a corner lot in the north end has transformed from an old gas station to the most environmentally sustainable privately owned building in Atlantic Canada.

Somerset Square, owned by Commercial Properties Limited, sits at the top of its class in energy efficiency, with rain-water collection used to flush toilets, a white roof to reduce cooling costs, natural light to minimize electricity consumption and low-maintenance landscaping that doesn't require frequent watering.

The building at the corner of Wellesley Avenue and Somerset Street received the gold-level international designation in October 2009 from Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

"We felt it was important to raise the bar a little bit in our industry," said Peter Milan, the Commercial Properties project manager in charge of the design and construction of the building.

"It's always nice to be first."

In 2007, the environmental engineering firm Stantec had outgrown its previous space. The firm hired Commercial Properties to develop a silver-level LEED building.

"As property developers we got excited about that and took it one step further and built a LEED gold building," Milan said.

"We sort of challenged ourselves to be the first one."

When construction finished in December of 2008, Somerset Square became the most environmentally sustainable building in Saint John and one of 18 commercial buildings in Canada with gold status.

The 25,000 square-foot complex, which also houses offices for Coast Tire, is ex-

pected to produce half the energy costs of a building without an energy-efficient design.

"It's an important step in the sense that it's leading the way for other buildings to follow suit," said Matthew Peachman, a mechanical engineer with Stantec who also sits on the Canada Green Building Council, the organization that administers the LEED designations.

"Sometimes it's hard to be the first guy to go down the road like that."

But the benefits are huge, he said, and over time, outweigh the added capital costs.

As an employee in the building, Peachman notices the impact of good ventilation and natural light, which are proven to enhance productivity and learning.

"Quite often our lights are off and still the atmosphere here is very nice," he said. The windows open, providing a pleasant breeze for the workers.

The fact Commercial Properties redeveloped a "brown field," or industrial lot, adds to the environmental benefits, Milan said.

"Part of the excitement was developing that land and putting it back to good use," he said. "It's good for the neighbourhood."

It also doesn't use up precious urban green space, he added.

The building won a Brownie Award for best small-scale development from the Canadian Urban Institute in Excellence in Project Development at the end of October 2009.

Only six such awards are given out each year in Canada.

Now that Commercial Properties has its first successful LEED standard building under its belt, it's inevitable more will follow, Milan said.

"There's no question," he said, without elaborating on specific future projects.

"What we know for sure is we will own another LEED building."