



Tommy Linstroth, LEED AP, is head of Sustainable Initiatives with Melaver, Inc. Melaver owns and manages approximately 1.5 million square feet of LEED-certified space. Look for more columns from Linstroth in coming issues of Sustainable Facility and his previous columns at www.SustainableFacility.com.

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Weathering the Storm

>> BY TOMMY LINSTROTH

We're living in some tough times right now. The one silver lining to our current economic situation is that with great challenge comes great opportunity. But what the heck does that mean for our buildings and us? One thing seems pretty consistent: There is a continued push for energy efficiency and sustainable buildings—from schools to federal buildings to anything new.

We also have an opportunity in the buildings we already occupy. When times get tough, we can often become more worried about short-term issues like retaining that tenant at all costs but with no tenant improvements, cutting common area maintenance (CAM) costs to the bone, and putting any and every capital improvement on hold. At least that's what I'm seeing in my part of the world.

But what is important to realize is that this is also a critical time to re-examine your sustainability practices. If your green efforts are first on the cutting block, there can be many potential ramifications. Tenants can and do notice such things, and cutting them now in a market with growing occupancy rates and increasing incentives to move can hurt you more than it helps your short-term budget. Sure, some green programs do carry a premium; you may have to pay for recycling at the building, or have a premium on the organic coffee. But I hear time and again from tenants who not only appreciate these "green perks" but have also undergone a fundamental mind-shift to embody the concepts they represent. Tenants who used to not care where their paper and cans went have now gone on to champion recycling throughout the building. It seems small, but to lose that focus now puts us back at square one when the

economy levels out. And even worse, losing that focus sends a message to both tenants and staff that sustainability isn't a truly important concept in the building—it's just something that will be cut as soon as things may look a little shaky.

In fact, now can be a great time to not only maintain the programs that are already in place but to expand them. Now is the time to get tenant buy-in on new energy and water efficiency programs. Want that CAM bill to go down? It's the perfect time to install motion sensors in the bathrooms and corridors. Sure, you'll see a minor bump in cost, but by the time 2010 hits you'll be seeing a drop in consumption—which you'll need because electricity rates aren't going anywhere but up, especially as talks of carbon regulation and mercury reduction are looking closer to becoming law.

I'm not suggesting it's time to undertake unnecessary capital expenditures, but all of the uncertainty right now provides a good checkpoint to re-evaluate our buildings and our energy and water consumption, and to start tackling those little conservation efforts that may have been put off in earlier years.

Re-commission your HVAC system to make sure it is still functioning properly—that your outside air dampers are set correctly, that your VAV boxes operate properly, and that your set points and operational schedule are accurate. Re-commissioning often pays for itself within a year or two. It's amazing how fast our systems stop operating as efficiently as they were designed to operate—whether from build-outs, age or just changing conditions.

Still haven't changed out those T12s? Now is the time! And don't forget to start to implement your light-bulb recycling program this month as well—it's as easy as getting pre-paid boxes that you fill up and ship to the recycler whenever they're full. You'll be preventing mercury from being released into the environment. Heck, for compact fluorescent bulbs, you can drop them off at Home Depot or IKEA for free.

The building-specific possibilities are endless. It's important to recognize that 2009 is not the time to cut back on your green and sustainability practices. In fact, this year is the perfect time to re-analyze our buildings and management practices to ensure that we're squeaking every drop of energy efficiency out of our systems, and if it takes a couple bucks today to save thousands at the end of the year, we should all think about doing it. **SF**

