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Pointing the way to green future West Sac's pyramid becomes the state's building laboratory.

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The 10-story ziggurat once housed the Money Store. Sacramento Bee file, 1998

The pyramid building in West Sacramento, once headquarters of the Money Store, is turning a new shade of green.

The 10-story ziggurat on the bank of the Sacramento River will remain gold on the outside. It's the inside, now home to the California Department of General Services, that is adopting the color of the environmental movement.

Guardians of DGS, the landlord agency of state government, aspire to make the ziggurat a test case for environmentally friendly building practices -- a project they fondly call "greening the Zig."

"We need a laboratory to test how ideas become acculturated," said Ron Joseph, who, as director of DGS until his retirement last month, championed his agency's metamorphosis.

The greening is happening in ways visible and not-so-visible. A sign on the door to the room housing computer servers is obvious, for example. "Conserve Energy," it admonishes. "Turn off lights!"

But a campaign to reduce the number of computer printers in the building -- thereby saving on paper, electricity and cartridges -- is evident only to the employees who have given up the luxury of printing documents at their desks.

With the Zig and its 1,200 occupants leading the way, the department aims in the next eight years to transform 1,600 buildings under its control into models of sustainable work spaces.

Promoting conservation became a top priority at DGS in late 2004 when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued an executive order to cut electricity use in state-owned buildings 20 percent by 2015.

The order came with a five-page "action plan" for making that happen, whether through purchase of efficient appliances and equipment; through requiring new buildings to meet professional standards for "green" buildings; or through "retro-commissioning" the state's largest existing buildings to eliminate wasteful heating and air conditioning systems or other such equipment.

In contrast to Schwarzenegger's order six months later committing the state to reducing global-warming pollution, the order to reform state properties received little public notice. But in DGS, it was huge.

Joseph, an administrator with 33 years of state service, had just assumed the top job at DGS. The order to "green" California's real estate resonated with him.

"I grew up in the '60s and '70s when there was high awareness of maintaining the environment," Joseph said. "That was part of my socialization. I've always tried to live in an environmentally conscious manner. That means I keep the thermostat at 68 (degrees), I turn the lights out"

But spreading his consciousness and habits to others, he discovered, was not easy.

"I went to my building people and said, 'How do we manage the building? How do we manage the temperature?' They told me that is the toughest job they have," Joseph said. "When you take the temperature from 70 to 68, people react virulently."

And forget trying to take away their small appliances. "You can't get people to get rid of their space heaters, their coffee pots," he said.

Department leaders pressed ahead nevertheless. Last fall, they started eliminating desktop printers wherever possible, connecting workers to a smaller number of networked laser printers that could be programmed to print on both sides of a sheet.

"You should have seen the e-mails I got," Joseph said, recounting the tenor: "As if my work isn't hard enough, now you're taking away my tools and requiring more out of me!"

Mark Hernandez, a data processing manager whose responsibilities include managing the building's printers, gave up his own printer to the cause, discovering something about his personal work habits in the process.

"I became more selective about what I did print," Hernandez said, estimating that he prints 25 percent to 30 percent fewer documents now.

Other changes in the ziggurat include the use of software that powers down PCs when they're not in use, and turns them off at night; use of low-mercury fluorescent light tubes; and use of carpeting made with at least 10 percent recycled fibers.

DGS recycled its own image, as well, adopting the motto "Building Green, Buying Green, Working Green" and redesigning its logo to feature leaves on a green background.

Joseph said Schwarzenegger deserves credit for pushing the cause, but he's not alone.

"Let's face it," Joseph said. "Everybody is talking about greening -- it's coming to critical mass."

A look at membership in the U.S. Green Building Council supports his statement. Founded in 1993, the industry group had attracted only 264 members by 1999. Today, membership stands at 7,725.

In 2000, the council launched an environmental building standard known as LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, which has become the leading standard for green building construction and operations worldwide.

Part of the governor's executive order involves seeking LEED certification on virtually all state buildings. Besides achieving high marks in energy efficiency, LEED-certified buildings meet standards for sustainable site development, water savings, materials use and indoor environmental quality.

Exactly what that means -- and what that may cost in the short term or save in the long run -- has yet to be defined. Ken Hunt, a DGS spokesman, said studies are under way to outline the job ahead. For now, the state doesn't even know how much electricity consumption it needs to shave to meet the governor's 2015 goal.

What officials can say is that the spirit is willing. Will Bush, the current interim director of DGS, said that, like his predecessor Joseph, greening the state's buildings is his No. 1 priority.

As for the ziggurat, its future is controlled not only by the state, but by Wachovia Corp., a banking company that owns the building. As it turns out, the concept of going green is "along the same lines of what we're doing here in Charlotte," said company spokeswoman Elizabeth Pollet from her office in North Carolina.
