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New Restroom Technologies Help Green Facilities

By Klaus Reichardt

At the office of Perkins + Will, a large Atlanta architectural firm, the company car is a Toyota hybrid. The office paper is 100 percent recycled and both sides of copy paper are always used before discarding. Styrofoam cups are never used – only ceramic coffee mugs – and all cleaning supplies are environmentally preferable.

In addition, a walk-through of the firm's restrooms (especially the men's restrooms) reveals more of the company's "Green Operations Plan." Water-saving toilets are installed, and the urinals are all waterless. Since the firm went "Green" four years ago, it is estimated that it has saved more than 300,000 gallons of water using these new restroom technologies.

According to a recent study by Texas A&M University, literally billions of gallons of water – as much as 20 percent of all water used annually – is used just to flush toilets and urinals in the United States. In fact, on average, just one urinal can use as much as 40,000 gallons of water per year.

The consequences of this usage include consumption of natural resources, construction of newer, larger, and costly sewer treatment centers, and the need for more energy and electricity to transmit these huge volumes of potable water to and from facilities. In California alone, 19 percent of the state's electrical power is used just for transporting water.

For these reasons, a closer look at waterless urinals and low-flow toilets can prove very beneficial for building architects, owners, and managers.

Waterless Urinals

Waterless or no-flush urinal systems are actually more than 100 years old. First found in Europe, they garnered little attention in the U.S. until the ecology movement of the 1970s. Interest increased considerably in the past 10 years as more and more facilities try to operate in a more environmentally responsible manner, and even more recently, because of LEED® certification. Installation of waterless urinals can help gain water conservation points.

Waterless urinals, which are manufactured by four or five different companies in the U.S., look like conventional urinals except there are neither flush valves nor the plumbing normally found on a urinal. Instead of using water to flush away urine, gravity drains the urine into a cylinder that sits atop the drain area of the urinal. The cylinder is filled with a thin layer of liquid sealant that prevents odors from escaping into the air. As the urinal is used, urine overflows into a drainpipe, much the same way as with a traditional urinal.

In addition to water and electrical savings, waterless urinals have other advantages, such as:

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- Plumbing costs are lowered since water lines to each urinal are unnecessary.
- No flush valves or sensors are required.
- Installation is usually faster and much easier than installing a conventional urinal.
- They are less prone to bacteria growth because the urinal stays drier than a conventional urinal.

However, the maintenance and cost to operate the different no-flush systems can vary. Because of this, building owners and managers should thoroughly investigate the different waterless systems available.

For instance, the cylinders on some systems require more frequent changes than on others. And the charges for these cylinders can vary from as little as a few dollars per cylinder to more than \$50 – potentially wiping out the financial savings a facility hoped to achieve going waterless.

Look Before Jumping

Before installing waterless urinals or the different brands of waterless systems, some facility managers suggest having a “pilot” program, evaluating the different units to see how well they work in your facility. This allows managers to become familiar with the different systems and gain confidence in the product, which then helps introduce them to building occupants.

Also, a cost analysis should be performed, especially with waterless urinal systems, to determine the actual cost to maintain the units and their potential costs and savings since, as mentioned earlier, this can vary.

However, it is believed that widespread use of waterless urinals can produce a series of benefits: Because no or less water is required, water utilities do not need to treat and pump as much water, less wastewater is generated, and smaller quantities of water pumped leads to energy savings. All of these benefits help conserve natural resources and make building owners much more environmentally responsible.

Klaus Reichardt is the managing partner of Waterless No-Flush™ Urinals, Inc., Vista, California. For more information on Waterless Co., please call toll-free 888-663-5874 or email to sales@waterless.com.

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