

Blue Cross goes green with new office tower

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The Blue Cross building, at left, includes a vegetated roof, a rainwater collection system, bicycle parking and special compost and recycling stations.

PROVIDENCE — When some 1,100 Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island workers start moving into their new 13-story office building next weekend, most will enjoy sweeping views of downtown shared only by those who can afford to rent or own pricey nearby condominiums.

They will get to exercise in a gym that shares the same striking views and eat lunch in a cafeteria that overlooks Waterplace Park.

Each worker will be able to control his or her lighting and desk space. Each will get a personalized mug for coffee and water and be offered only utensils that are made from biodegradable materials.

Copying will always be two-sided. And dozing through meetings may be tougher — carbon dioxide sensors will flood rooms with fresh air when necessary.

The new building that has arisen in Capital Center between Waterplace Park and the Providence train station may be leading the way into a new era for Rhode Island office workers because while it was built to meet national goals for efficiency and sustainability, it was also designed to encourage good health and morale for its workforce.

Two years ago critics, including [Governor Carcieri](#) and the state health commissioner, objected to plans to erect the building on high-priced downtown land that could burden ratepayers. But Blue Cross president and chief executive officer James E. Purcell is proud of his \$90-million (\$125 million when you include furnishings and “soft” costs such as fees and engineering) building and insists it is actually saving money for the health insurer.

As he began a tour last week, he handed out this statement: “Having a green building in downtown Providence is not something we legally had to do — it is the right thing to do, and it is good business.”

He said the company will recover the additional costs in a relatively short time by saving on electricity, paper, natural gas and water. And he hopes it will do more: “To the extent we can inspire other companies by our example, that is a good thing. Rhode Island’s environment is very important to us. This is where we work and live.”

A few years ago, few people had heard of the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design “green” building standards. Now, the Blue Cross building is just the latest in a stream of “green” buildings completed recently in Rhode Island. It follows the recent opening of a new \$60 million headquarters for FM Global in Johnston, a \$14 million library at the University of Rhode Island’s Bay Campus, and a \$59-million biotechnology center at URI’s Kingston campus.

Monday, the Potter League for Animals in Middletown is dedicating an \$8-million “green” animal shelter with thousands of plants on its roof.

Purcell says his company is in the business of health and wellness. He hopes his building will encourage that among his staff, and serve as an example for other companies to embrace a similar culture.

Not everyone is equally impressed. State Health Commissioner Christopher F. Koller raised concerns when building plans were announced in 2007. He said he understood Blue Cross’s desire to consolidate its workers from six buildings in Providence to one and he praised the company’s commitment to staying in Providence.

But he questioned why it didn’t pick a less expensive location in the city in an effort to maintain the trust of the public and subscribers.

Koller said last week he stands by that letter. “I can’t speak for the merits of the building. But I raised concerns about the location and perceptions and nothing has changed.”

Carcieri also raised some concerns initially, but after meeting with Purcell he said he was resigned to it being built over his objections.

Some city officials were upset that Blue Cross was able to take advantage of a \$25-million city tax break that was designed to attract a new, out-of-state, for-profit company to the Capital Center, not a nonprofit already doing business in Providence.

But Blue Cross officials insist they made the right choice and it is not costing their subscribers any more. They have taken out advertisements arguing that their building promotes a healthy economy and a healthy environment and that it will actually save \$25 million over 23 years.

Controller Brian O’Malley said that savings figure was the result of conservative accounting. The company had engineers look at the two older Blue Cross buildings on La Salle Square and Empire Street. They estimated it would cost \$47 million for new roofs, new mechanical equipment and modern wiring.

On the other side, the new building location at 500 Exchange St. came with a ready-made foundation — a parking garage for 484 cars, and the city tax break. O’Malley said a lot of people focus on the tax break,

but it's only a small piece of the several hundred million dollars it costs to operate the office building over 23 years.

Over the long run, accountants figured it would cost about \$1 million less to build and operate the new building than to renovate and operate the two old ones. They estimated the company would get \$24 million by selling the old buildings, so that added up to the \$25 million savings now being touted. (The old buildings actually sold for \$26 million, so the savings is actually more.)

None of the projections tried to account for the increased productivity and reduced absenteeism and turnover that some predict will result from working in such a vibrant new building.

"We're a service organization," said Purcell. "I think the mood of our employees is important. If we do things right, we'll see the results."

The building has racks for 64 bicycles. Drivers who carpool or drive hybrids will get preferred parking. Big tanks on the top floor will gather 6,000 gallons of storm water and supply it to the air conditioning system. That reduces the runoff of pollution and the use of potable water.

Roofs are vegetated. Toilets have buttons that provide a choice in how much water is flushed.

Despite more than seven acres of new rugs and furniture, there are no chemical odors. All the furnishings are recycled or recyclable.

There is plenty of sunlight. Architect Mark A. Spaulding points to the nine-foot windows with low sills and uses the term "daylight harvesting." More than 90 percent of the employees, he said, will have the beautiful views, and the daylight that comes with them.

Purcell says the green features costs maybe \$1 million extra. But the company will recoup the money quickly. Energy savings alone will be more than \$160,000 annually.

For anyone who might be interested, the top floor is available for lease. It offers sweeping views in every direction.

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