Capitol Region Watershed District
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Breathing New Life Into an Old Building

Text transcript

Mark Doneux, Administrator: This building project has been an amazing journey. It started back in 2012 when we realized we were going to eventually run out of space in our old office.

We wanted a space we could call our own and really emulate the work that we do in the watershed and have a demonstration site that was also our office building.

Mary Texer, Vice President, Board of Managers: We looked at over 75 sites before we found this one. We found this place and it was perfect.

Mark Doneux: It was owned by MacQueen Equipment, and we knew that we could design it for the long term and have space for our staff, our public meetings and the long-term goals of the organization.

Mary Texer: When we bought the building or first looked at it, Kurt, the former owner, said to me, what are you going to do with it? I said, we're going to move in.

Anna Eleria, Planning Projects and Grants Division Manager: The building is located in the heart of our watershed district, in the heart of the city of Saint Paul, so it is very important that our building embodied sustainable practices and values.

Mary Texer: We're asking other people to be sustainable. We're asking other people to be environmentally conscious. We'd better walk that talk. And we're doing that here.

So we've cleaned up the brownfield. We came in and redid the building so that it's environmentally sustainable.

Mark Doneux: This building will meet LEED Gold Standards. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Anna Eleria: We've taken a concerted effort to incorporate water practices that treat rainwater as a resource. So, it includes a big cistern and that collects all the rainwater from our roof and uses it for non-potable uses like flushing toilets.

Mary Texer: I get goose bumps every time I walk in and I see that cistern there.

Mark Doneux: We have rain gardens that collect water and infiltrate it from the parking lots. We also have pervious pavers on the east parking lot of our building.

We incorporated tree trenches, and a tree trench is essentially a rock trench that collects and captures rainwater. In our urban landscape we have almost 40 percent hard surfaces like rooftops, parking lots, streets and sidewalks. Those hard surfaces don't allow the water to naturally soak back in the ground like they did before. With our rainwater management system we're able to capture that and soak it back in the ground. That water gets cleaned up, it replenishes our aquifers and helps protect our lakes and rivers.

Mary Texer: We're helping to make our urban environment a lot healthier for everyone because it's so sustainable. And it's so bright and cheery and it's so open.

Anna Eleria: We converted those eight large garage bays on the east side of the building to our windows.

Mark Doneux: We have natural daylight harvesting, so it significantly reduces the amount of energy we need to light the building. We have automated lights and blinds that adjust the lighting in the building, not only to save energy, but to provide a consistent and constant lighting throughout the day.

Anna Eleria: We've also added solar panels onto our garage so that we can meet about 20 percent of our electricity needs with a renewable source.

Mark Doneux: The wood blocks are clad in Siberian elm. Siberian elm is an invasive species that we were removing from a wetland, the Willow Reserve in Saint Paul. We're able to harvest that lumber and repurpose it in our building.

Anna Eleria: The carpet that you see in CRWD's offices comes from recycled fishing nets from the Philippines, which is my home country and is certainly very special to me.

I'm also really excited about the pocket park. The pocket park utilizes rainwater from the interior cistern and directs it to an interactive exhibit that's been designed by a local exhibit designer. It represents a mini urban watershed.

Mary Texer: We can have the kids in and let them play. I mean, that's what it's all about.

Anna Eleria: Utilizing other means and methods to communicate and translate some of these complex scientific ideas and information in a way that is much more accessible, beautiful and much more engaging and fun.

Another unique feature at CRWD and figures very prominently on the interior side of our site is art.

Mark Doneux: We have an amazing Mississippi River of iron pour. That's not only art, but it symbolizes the entire Mississippi River system.

Anna Eleria: Another piece is a large glass mural that represents a semi abstract piece of art that connects the community.

Our third piece is this large suspended kinetic sculpture created by an artist based in Duluth, Minnesota. He's taken water level velocity data collected by CRWD staff from the Trout Brook Storm Sewer. It's to show our visitors how invisible infrastructure works and what it looks like.

Another local artist, a painter, worked with second graders in the city of Saint Paul. Using both water and sediment from the Mississippi River and a community rain garden in a painting.

Mark Doneux: When we looked at our building, we looked at it through the lens of a community space, an office space, an environmentally sound building as well as a place we could really showcase what we do.

We went through about a yearlong design process for this building, and I really believe that no element was overlooked. We have an amazing assortment of art, natural features, natural light, energy conservation and stormwater management.

While it took many years to get here, every day walking through those doors, it tells me it's all worthwhile.

Mary Texer: Like a dream come true. It feels right. It feels right that this is where we're supposed