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Office-building owners compete to cut the most energy

By Katie Ormsby

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Office buildings throughout the Puget Sound are going on a diet — an energy diet known as the "Kilowatt Crackdown."

Now in its second year, the competition scores energy usage and identifies ways to save more. Last year the 53 buildings entered in the contest conserved enough energy to power 1,000 homes for one year, according to Rodney Kauffman, president of the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) of King County. BOMA, which leads the Kilowatt Crackdown, was established in 1912 and is a trade association that represents members from 250 firms who own or manage commercial real estate.

"Many people in business are naturally competitive," said Jack Davis, from BetterBricks, a sponsor of the challenge. "This is a way to tap into that competitiveness in a fun, exciting way."

About 20 percent of the Puget Sound office inventory, or more than 18 million square feet of office space, was represented in the first crackdown.

"We give awards for highest performance and greatest improvement, but the overall award is the Kilowatt Cup," said Davis. "It's like the Stanley Cup of energy efficiency."

Unlike the shiny, oversized Stanley Cup, the trophy is sculpted entirely from recycled materials, including brass hinges, nails and wing nuts.

The 2009 Kilowatt Cup was awarded to Unico Properties, a real-estate investment and operating company headquartered in Seattle.

The Financial Center, a building Unico manages, reduced energy consumption by 17 percent. Another building they entered, The IBM Building, reduced its energy consumption by 14 percent.

"We raised our hands very quickly when we heard about the competition," said Brett Phillips, Unico sustainability project manager. "The world of real estate is changing. The green fad has

become more than a fad. It's the direction business is going and the competition helped to give us a competitive edge."

Phillips said that most of Unico's energy-efficiency measures come from its engineers continually maintaining the properties and looking for ways to improve operations. For example, Unico introduced lighting-control systems to make sure that lights don't run when the building isn't in use. It also installed solar-film windows, which help reject heat in the summer and save heat in the winter.

Unico is competing again and Phillips said that it's expanding participation to a few of its Bellevue, Tacoma and Renton buildings.

The Kilowatt Crackdown uses the nationwide Energy Star rating system when calculating energy performance. The system allows BOMA to track each building's energy use because the competitors are required to enter monthly records.

"Most people have probably seen an Energy Star sticker on an appliance that is energy efficient," said Davis. "This is like that, but for a building. Instead of a sticker, it's a plaque that buildings can earn."

Last year, 31 participating buildings qualified for the Energy Star label.

The second Kilowatt Crackdown has a two-year timeline. Since there is more time, scoping studies have been added. During the study, BOMA sends an energy expert to walk-through the building and provides a list of low-cost, energy-saving suggestions.

The competition is timely considering Mayor Mike McGinn approved the Energy Disclosure Ordinance in February. The new ordinance requires commercial property owners to measure energy use. The city will use the ratings to compare buildings and require building owners to disclose the findings to prospective buyers and tenants during the selling or leasing of the property.

"The ordinance ties in perfectly with the Kilowatt Crackdown," said Davis. What it mandates "is exactly the point of the friendly competition."

Kauffman said, "The ordinance will take a bit of time to sink in, but I think that we'll see an increase in participation because of it."

At this point, 48 buildings are participating. Registration goes through April 30.

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