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Smart growth is occurring right over our heads

Lex Birney is the CEO of a real estate company that, among other things, develops cool, fun places such as marinas and golf courses.

But judging from Birney's recent presentation at Franklin & Marshall College, acquiring, developing and marketing properties is not what gets his juices flowing.

It's trying to do those things in a way that minimizes harm to the land, water and air.

Take his new roof.

"It blooms three times a year," Birney said.

For Birney, it wasn't enough that a roof keep out the rain. He wanted the roof of his four-story headquarters in Edgewater, Md., to make a statement.

He had it planted with succulents - fleshy, water-absorbing plants growing in a lightweight medium.

When it rains, the shallow-rooted plants soak up much of the water. Any water that does wash off the roof gets captured in rain barrels for watering the grounds.

Idea takes root

Turning roofs into water-tight, rain-absorbing gardens is a concept that's been gaining ground in Europe for a few decades.

Birney read about it in his local newspaper. The story - about a local official who went to Germany and saw rooftops sprouting vegetation - planted a seed.

At a meeting to discuss plans for a new headquarters for his 330-employee firm, The Brick Companies, Birney asked if anyone knew anything about living roofs. The architect offered to look into it.

"He came back a month later," Birney recalled, "and said, 'This is the most unbelievable thing. We have got to do this. I'll put my time in for free.'"

Covering the 12,000-square foot roof with thousands of low-lying plants wasn't cheap. A conventional roof would have cost \$40,000, Birney said, while his "living roof" was \$170,000.

The living roof offers some savings because it provides superior insulation and may last twice as long as a conventional roof.

Some builders install living roofs to eliminate or reduce the size of storm water retention basins and to allow for more or larger buildings on a property.

Birney's motivation, however, was mostly to do something good for the environment. The plants on the roof absorb carbon dioxide, release oxygen and trap toxins that otherwise might flow to the Chesapeake Bay.

If the green roof and other earth-friendly policies of The Brick Companies happen to gain the company good will, Birney figures so much the better.

In September 2005, the company wrote a vision statement committing to environmental awareness.

“Our goal,” the statement reads, “is to conserve resources, restore ecosystems, eliminate toxic materials and become a dominant environmental company.”

The Brick Companies uses disposable cups made of corn and purchases electricity generated by wind and farm methane.

But the living roof is the most visible symbol of Birney’s ecological consciousness.

Growth spurt

The succulents for the roof came from a nursery run by Ed Snodgrass in Street, Md., not too far south of Lancaster County.

Snodgrass, of Emory Knoll Farms, started the green-roof business in 1999 as a sideline to farming. He said his nursery remains the only one in North America that sells nothing but plants for green roofs.

He carries more than 100 varieties, and sales have doubled almost every year. The business is now profitable, Snodgrass said, and he’s adding five greenhouses to the existing nine.

Plants from Snodgrass’ nursery now cover about 1.6 million square feet of roof space, including the H.J. Heinz corporate offices in Pittsburgh and RadioShack world headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas.

Some day, a living roof might even show up in Lancaster County.

When that happens, it will add a whole new dimension to the concept of smart growth.