



BUSINESS:

Boston group shifts from 'Big Dig' to lowering commercial carbon emissions

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In Boston during the 1990s and 2000s, downtown business and property owners openly worried that the decades-long Central Artery/Tunnel project would suck the economic life out of the central city as noise, dust and daily traffic disruptions turned sections of the city into a dysfunction junction.

Intent on having their voices heard by state transportation planners and city officials, a handful of property owners created a nonprofit organization called A Better City, whose charge was to keep Boston's business community from being buried by the "Big Dig."

Boston's central city survived the \$26 billion road project, which was completed in 2006. And the area most disrupted by the construction is more vibrant, less polluted and more livable than ever, according to A Better City, whose headquarters sits two blocks from the now subterranean stretch of Interstate 93.

Today, the same organization is pushing a new "better city" agenda, one it believes could elevate Boston's status as one of the most environmentally sound cities in the world, on par with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's New York and West Coast perennial green cities San Francisco and Portland, Ore.

David Straus, director of ABC's Sustainability & Climate Change Initiative, said Boston is earning its environmental credentials by challenging property owners and real estate holding firms to make their buildings as energy- and waste-efficient as any big city's in the United States.

"Our goal was always to have Boston become a green leader," Straus said in a recent interview. "The question was how we were going to shift from a transportation management association with a strong focus on one project into something new and more encompassing of other issues."

Building on its core constituency of downtown commercial property owners, A Better City expanded both its geographic footprint and its work scope into the realms of climate change and sustainability. Real estate owners and managers, the group reasoned, represented a large and untapped cross-section of Boston's economy where real gains could be made in reducing greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution.

A race to cut energy bills

In 2010, the group launched the "Challenge for Sustainability" to help Boston property owners, businesses and other institutions adopt best practices with respect to energy and water consumption, solid waste generation, and greenhouse gas emissions.

More than merely encouraging sustainability, organizers put teeth into the challenge by incorporating a 2 percent annual greenhouse gas reduction goal for all challenge participants. They also developed a Web-based score card that allows participants to measure their progress across a range of metrics, from electricity consumption to solid waste production to vehicle miles traveled and use of energy-efficient appliances and lighting.

In March, A Better City reported that businesses participating in the challenge had reduced electricity consumption by 7 percent over the life of the program, from 400 gigawatt-hours to 372 GWh annually. Those reductions resulted in \$5.7 million in electricity cost savings in 2012 alone, according to ABC.

Greenhouse gas emissions, meanwhile, fell by 7,000 tons, or 4 percent, between 2011 and 2012, thanks to measures taken by owners of 64 Boston properties -- including landmark buildings such as the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, John Hancock Tower, TD Garden and New England Aquarium.

"The program has proven to be a win-win -- good business and economics, while positioning Boston and its commercial real estate as sustainability leaders," ABC President and CEO Richard Dimino said in a statement announcing the program's latest results.

The nonprofit effort also dovetails with the city of Boston's new Building Energy Reporting and Disclosure Ordinance, which requires roughly 1,600 large and medium-sized buildings to report their annual energy and water consumption as well as greenhouse gas emissions.

According to city officials, Boston's commercial, residential and government buildings are responsible for about 70 percent of citywide greenhouse gas emissions, and reducing building-generated emissions is the top priority in Mayor Tom Menino's 6-year-old Climate Action Plan.

Carolyn Kaplan, chief sustainability officer for Nixon Peabody LLP, a global law firm that employs more than 300 attorneys and staff at its Boston headquarters, said her firm has made significant progress toward meeting both its own energy efficiency goals and those of the city because of the partnership with A Better City and the firm's participation in the "Challenge for Sustainability" program.

Law firm makes a case for sustainability

The firm occupies more than 160,000 square feet of a 32-story high rise in Boston's Financial District, where it often pilots sustainability measures that are later implemented into other Nixon Peabody offices as part of the firm's "Legally Green" initiative, launched in 2007. The Boston office joined ABC's "Challenge for Sustainability" in 2011 to help augment existing practices and finished the year with the highest score among the participating organizations.

With A Better City's support, the firm's Boston office has embraced a series of energy efficiency programs, including the drafting of a formal energy management plan, changing automated lighting schedules, encouraging behavioral changes that will reduce energy use and conducting an energy audit. That audit determined the firm could save roughly 240,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity in its Boston office by implementing a strong demand-side response program.

This year, Nixon Peabody is putting its energy plan and audit results into practice, and has committed to a \$200,000 office retrofit project to shave additional kilowatt-hours from its Boston electricity budget, Kaplan said. Much of the retrofit focus will be on lighting, including the replacement of halogen light fixtures and exit signs with high-efficiency light-emitting diode (LED) technology and re-lamping and re-ballasting existing Biac fixtures with more energy efficient Biac systems. The firm is also participating in a pilot project to meter its energy consumption from lighting to help build the business case for future energy-saving measures.

Nixon Peabody will also reduce energy consumption from office vending machines, by reducing the number of machines, using Energy Star-rated machines, removing lighting lamps or installing "energy miser" devices that allow the remaining machines to hibernate when they are not in use. The Boston office is also upgrading some of its restrooms with energy-efficient hand dryers.

While Nixon Peabody may have adopted some or all of these solutions on its own, Kaplan said the partnership with A Better City allowed it to engage more quickly and decisively on key energy metrics. The firm has also benefited from regular consultation with a network of participants.

including independent experts, energy managers and financial officers from other businesses and institutions that are facing similar challenges.

"It certainly has been helpful in keeping us on track," Kaplan said of the partnership with A Better City. While the firm was able to broadly state its energy objectives, she said ABC staff were instrumental in converting those broad ideas into specific action plans. The firm also made use of ABC's score card to gain a deeper understanding of its energy, natural resources and carbon footprint.

"Completing the score card is the first step in a process where you start to drill down and ask critical questions," Kaplan said. "What does it mean to reduce electricity consumption by 5 percent? What are the barriers, and how do we overcome them to achieve real progress?"

Hoping to expand to other cities

For Nixon Peabody and a number of other Boston firms, the barriers to meeting energy and sustainability goals are breaking down.

According to ABC's Straus, last year's 64 "Challenge for Sustainability" participants represented 22 million square feet of office space, or roughly 8 percent of Boston's entire commercial real estate portfolio. "We are constantly pushing our partners to do more, and we've been able to record annual aggregated reductions of close to 4 percent across all of our participants' properties," he said.

A Better City's success has also been noted, and in some cases replicated, in other U.S. cities from Seattle to Chicago to Washington, D.C. Organizers from more than two dozen nonprofits along with utility representatives and other officials gathered in Boston last month for an inaugural National Summit on Green Business Engagement Programs.

The event, sponsored by ABC, could lead to the formation of a national organization with a common set of objectives and activities, officials said.

"We are all trying to achieve similar results in different communities," Brian Geller, executive director of Seattle's 2030 District, said in a statement. He added that the summit provided "vital insights into the challenges and innovations of green business programs around the country," and that Seattle may launch its own "Green Business Challenge" in the future.

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