

Portland federal building due for big green makeover

by Harry Esteve, *The Oregonian*

The homely, humongous Edith Green/Wendell Wyatt federal building in downtown Portland will be transformed into an environmental showpiece and become Oregon's single biggest federal stimulus project.

When it's done, the boxy, concrete-and-glass tower at Southwest Third and Jefferson will have a softer, sleeker, more modern look, according to an architect's drawing of the finished product. As a bonus, the 24-year-old windows won't leak and the building could qualify for "LEED" certification, an internationally recognized green seal of approval.



Olivia Bucks/The Oregonian
The Edith Green/Wendell Wyatt Federal Building in downtown Portland is scheduled for a \$133 million facelift thanks to stimulus spending

"We're looking at this as an opportunity to showcase how we can take an existing building and turn it into a high-performance green building," said Kevin Kampschroer, acting director of the environmental construction program for the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C.

The \$133 million price tag puts it far ahead of any other stimulus-funded work in the state, and among the more expensive building fix-ups in the nation. The closest in Oregon is a \$33 million railroad track rehabilitation for the Port of Coos Bay, according to recovery.org, the Web site for a nonprofit that tracks stimulus projects.

The Green/Wyatt project is part of a broader Obama Administration plan to convert government buildings from massive resource wasters into certifiably energy- and water-efficient structures. More than \$4 billion has been set aside for similar reconstruction projects around the country.

For Portland, the selection of the Green/Wyatt building hands the city another entry for its environmentally friendly portfolio, plus an economic boost from a major downtown project during a particularly stagnant time for construction.

"We're talking hundreds of workers," said Bob Shiprack, who represents the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council. "This is a total remodel. It's as far as you can go without knocking the whole building down."

The main hitch, says Shiprack, is the timeframe. Work isn't slated to start until about a year from now. "I don't know what the hold-up is on this." In the meantime, he said, "employment continues to decline in the building trades."

The Portland firm SERA Architects has been hired to take the lead on the project.

Initial plans to renovate the 18-story, 350,000-square-foot building were outlined three years ago, but never made it to the top of the government's funding priority list. That changed when Congress approved the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- the federal stimulus program.

The Portland project got the go-ahead because so much design work already had been finished, Kampschroer said.

Plans call for a new “skin” for the outside of the building, with each side receiving a different treatment to take advantage of natural light, heat and cooling. Protruding “fins” covered in vines and other vegetation will block heat in the summer and capture light in the winter. New double-glazed windows will take the place of the leaky, single-paned ones that are the source of tremendous energy loss, Kampschroer said.

The new structure will be designed not only to cut energy use dramatically, but also to resist earthquakes and, because it’s a federal building, bomb blasts. At the same time, all electrical, plumbing and other mechanical systems will be replaced. Security systems also will be upgraded.

“This is a building that’s had no major modernization since the mid-70s,” Kampschroer said.

Building tenants -- including the IRS, the Veteran’s Administration and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, will be asked to vacate the building for up to three years while the work goes on.

Some may question such a lofty price tag for a renovation -- why not just start from scratch? For example, the smaller, 11-story Oregon Sustainability Center to be built at Portland State University is projected to cost \$90 million.

Recycling existing buildings represents the new green ethic better than building new ones, said Jerry Yudelson, a green building consultant in Tucson, Ariz., who is familiar with Portland projects.

“Most of the energy savings that’s going to happen in the next 10 years is going to come from existing buildings,” Yudelson said. “It’s a big movement. It’s happening all over the country.”

The building, named for two prominent Oregon members of Congress, generally gets low aesthetic marks. It’s “representative of its era,” Yudelson said.

Port of Portland director Bill Wyatt, son of one of the building’s namesakes, said he’s glad it’s getting an update.

“It’s an incredibly valuable piece of property,” Wyatt said. Keeping it as a government building adheres to the original plan of a government complex in downtown. “It just makes a lot of sense to maintain what you’ve got.”

-- Harry Esteve; harryestev@news.oregonian.com