

PLAINFIELD PURCHASES OWN STREET LIGHTS

They did it! After almost two years of effort, the Town of Plainfield has purchased its streetlights. The fixtures arrived over the holidays and were installed in early January. As far as we know, Plainfield is the only town in the state that has actually entered an agreement with the local electric utility to operate municipal street lighting on utility-owned poles. And the savings are significant, compared with street light rental from the utility. Other towns have investigated the possibility but have been deterred by any number of factors.

HOW DID PLAINFIELD DO IT?

Two years ago, new selectperson Lori Barg noticed that the line item for streetlights in her small town totaled 1.5 percent of the town's annual budget. With the board's support, she figured out how the town might reduce that cost if it owned its 54 streetlights instead of leasing them from Green Mountain Power (GMP), the electricity provider. As an initial step, GMP provided a field audit of streetlights, unearthing a few billing discrepancies. Moreover, the town decided to eliminate four lights that were illuminating private property.

Depreciation costs that would have had to be paid to GMP by the town were initially prohibitive (and have in the past caused towns to abandon the effort to purchase lights). However, GMP agreed to reduce those depreciation costs to almost nothing. Additionally, the town found a vendor of street light bulbs at a cost 40% lower than the purchase price on the state vendor list for group purchases. The town will pay about \$16 per bulb.

In fiscal year 2003, the Town of Plainfield spent \$6,721.45 for street light rental. Under the new town ownership of street lighting, Plainfield will pay GMP about \$3,600 for electricity and maintenance in 2005. This cost could be further reduced if the town chooses to hire out the maintenance on an hourly basis (rather than contracting for maintenance with GMP on a monthly basis). The cost of purchasing the new streetlights was about \$11,100, excluding the installation cost at GMP's standard hourly rate. Efficiency Vermont is making an incentive payment to Plainfield for converting to high efficiency lighting. The project's simple payback will be approximately four years.

The new streetlights use energy efficient, high-pressure sodium lamps, compared with the older, inefficient hazardous mercury vapor lamps rented from the utility. There are aesthetic improvements as well. The new fixtures have a flat lens and distribute the light downward, minimizing light trespass and glare produced by older street lighting. Scientific studies also show that sodium vapor lights have less impact on bugs and bats and are therefore more "ecologically friendly."

The Vermont Department of Public Service served as technical consultant to Plainfield in this project. The Department retained Donna Leban, an outdoor lighting expert and author of a street lighting guide for Vermont municipalities. This brief guide is planned for release in the second quarter of 2005. Contact Christopher Owen, Energy Efficiency Specialist, at the Department of Public Service, 802/828 4038, for more information.

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Legislative and Membership Services

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