

## City hall's 'living wall' renovation underway

*Guelph Mercury*

GUELPH — The private company which installed Guelph City Hall's living wall was refurbishing the plant-based facet Wednesday.

Nedlaw Living Walls, a University of Guelph spinoff, was also training city staff on how to maintain the ground floor living wall, a visually striking feature that is intended to improve air quality in the municipal building.

"It's a bit of a learning experience for us," city hall building maintenance general manager Mario Petricevic said, expressing satisfaction, despite the temporary setback, with the function of the hydroponic wall.

The wall's plant microbes filter out gases from building materials and furniture.

"It's a green feature," he said, noting it's integral to the building's air quality system. "The science is established."

To ensure the biological wall functions as it should, Nedlaw will return once a month over the next year to make sure it's maintained and flourishing as it should.

Water had been leaking and plants dying for some time, causing Councillor Cam Guthrie to question its costs and value, including \$1,000 a month in maintenance going forward. He hasn't seen anything to change his mind.

"My position is firm," Guthrie said Wednesday, suggesting money for the "extreme makeover" of the wall and ongoing funding would be better spent attracting new businesses to Guelph.

Cambridge design and development director Bob Paul couldn't disagree more. His municipality's had a larger, three-storey living wall installed with construction of the new city hall there in 2007, and said the \$16,000 a year in maintenance is cheaper and better than heating and treating outside air drawn into the building. The plant wall absorbs volatile compounds in the air, releases oxygen and removes carbon dioxide, doing so cost-effectively, he said.

"It's exceeded expectations," said Paul.

Nedlaw director Alan Darlington, who founded the firm in 2000, was overseeing the Guelph makeover Wednesday. His background was as a researcher and adjunct professor in environmental studies at the university. He was intrigued by how plants could benefit space missions, then "down here on Earth."

Living walls are both esthetic and functional, with the challenges in Guelph including its hard water. And the walls need to be looked after.

"It's sort of like a car: you have to maintain it," Darlington said.

In his system, water flows down a vertical structure, between two filter-like rooting sheets to which a variety of plants are anchored. The mechanical system draws air in through this layered mass.

"The rubbish in the air (like benzene and formaldehyde) is pulled out and biologically broken down."

Darlington said that's done by the filtering microbes that find an inviting, natural home among the roots of the plants. They devour polluting agents like ants greedily consume sugar, he said.

His firm has similar living wall projects across the continent and abroad.

"We're just trying to put nature to work," Darlington said.

[vkirsch@guelphmercury.com](mailto:vkirsch@guelphmercury.com) (mailto:vkirsch@guelphmercury.com)



*Monique Lee of Nedlaw Living Walls installs plants Wednesday on the newly redone living wall at Guelph City Hall.*