

Earth-friendly dealership a first in state

LaFontaine group invests in green store to lower bills

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When Mike LaFontaine Jr., 34, approached his parents, Mike and Maureen LaFontaine, about building the state's first green dealership, it wasn't because he was a budding activist.

Rather, the oldest of the LaFontaines' two sons had been exploring ways to reduce energy costs on the new Buick-Pontiac-GMC-Cadillac store the family planned to build on M-59 in Highland Township. The new \$15-million dealership is to replace an existing store nearby that the family has outgrown by increasing sales to nearly 3,000 cars and trucks a year.

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The LaFontaine Automotive Group had been watching energy costs soar at its six other dealerships, made up of 14 foreign and domestic franchises, and Mike LaFontaine Jr. wanted to see whether there was a way to build cost savings into its new mega-store, such as solar panels or geothermal energy sources.

"You could just see the energy bills growing," Mike LaFontaine Jr. said. "I thought: 'What can we do?'"

During a tour of the new dealership, which is expected to be complete next spring, it's clear that a lot can be done.

The new dealership site is to comprise a 63,000-square-foot building on 24 acres of former agricultural land, and it will feature showrooms for the various brands, a large service area, as well as a café and boutique featuring specialty items. And all throughout, green features to save money and resources are built in.

The LaFontaines decided to heat and cool the building with a geothermal system that takes advantage of the earth's ability to store and maintain vast amounts of heat.

More than 60 wells were drilled about 300 feet into the ground behind the property, said Al Bloom, the general contractor on the project and president of Bloom General Contracting. Tubes and coils inside the wells are filled with water and other liquids and help move heat and cold back and forth between the earth and the building to achieve the right temperature.

The unconventional system will cost about half a million dollars more than a traditional heating and cooling system. But Ryan LaFontaine, 30, the family's youngest son and general manager of the new GM dealership, estimates that the special green features of the site will result in a 40%-50% reduction in energy costs.

Mike LaFontaine Jr. added that he expects the system will pay for itself in 7 years of lower costs.

While the innovative heating and cooling feature is the primary green attribute of the site, it's not the only one.

More than 80 skylights in the roof will provide natural light, reducing the need for electric lights. A pond was also created at the site to capture water runoff from the building and parking lot to recycle for irrigation.

As the family designed and built its dealership, the LaFontaines also started learning about other ways to go green in their business. "We started realizing how easy it was to do," Ryan LaFontaine said.

For example, the family's dealerships will now use vegetable oil as a lubricant in their service-area vehicle lifts instead of less Earth-friendly petroleum-based oils.

Bloom said he expects the new dealership to qualify for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification under the Green Building Rating System, which is the nationally accepted benchmark for design, construction and operation of high performance green buildings.

Mike LaFontaine, who has been selling cars and trucks around metro Detroit since 1966, estimated that going green has resulted in about \$1.5 million in excess costs up front, or about 10% of the total project. But he believes it will be worth it in the end.

"There are so many other motivating factors" for going green, Mike LaFontaine said.

The company plans to market the dealership's green attributes directly to customers, who are more concerned than ever about global warming, and it also will adopt some of what it learned at other sites. Ultimately, though, LaFontaine said one of the biggest reasons for going green is that it's the right thing to do.

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