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New LaFontaine Auto Dealership Goes Green

The LaFontaine family has created one of General Motors Corp.'s first green car dealerships -- and one of the greenest businesses in Michigan.

The LaFontaines expect that their newest dealership, a Buick, Pontiac, GMC Truck and Cadillac store in Highland Township, will soon be LEED certified for energy efficiency. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, an award bestowed on the most efficient buildings by the United States Green Building Council.)

The 63,000-square-foot two-story dealership opened June 2, about a year after construction began.

The building has numerous green touches, according to dealership principals Ryan La Fontaine and his mother, Maureen. One of the coolest -- doors that look like wood, but which are actually recycled compacted corn stalks.

The green effort started with a \$600,000 commitment to geothermal heat, Ryan La Fontaine said. The system uses the constant 50-degree temperature of groundwater 350 feet below the surface to both heat and cool the building. From there, the family decided to go all-out green for the building and seek LEED certification.

The green starts with the building's parking lot, which is made of recycled asphalt and concrete. It's also broken up with green spaces -- but most aren't grass. Instead they're native plants that require little watering. And what watering they require is supplied from a small pond that stores the runoff from the dealership's own roof and parking lot. Not only that, but the power to pump that irrigation comes from a small windmill behind the dealership.

The dealership's outdoor lighting uses lower powered lamps than usual, and the lights are on timers. The light poles can be modified to charge tomorrow's electric vehicles.

The building also features 85 solar tube skylights providing plenty of bright light inside even on cloudy days. On sunny days, automatic sensors switch off interior lights if the skylights provide enough light for work.

The dealership offers a \$9.95 oil change as a way to maintain regular contact with customers and improve loyalty. (That price also includes a car wash -- 85 percent recycled water, naturally.) Its 33 vehicle hoists in the service department use pressurized vegetable oil instead of petroleum-based hydraulic fluid.

The La Fontaine family also gave the dealership convenient touches for customers waiting to see staff or

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waiting for vehicle repairs. Included are a bistro cafe, a boutique offering unique art, jewelry and other accessories, and a "kid zone" area with an Xbox 360 machine.

Ryan and Maureen LaFontaine said their plans changed so many times during construction that there isn't a final set of plans that's entirely accurate, showing everything that wound up in the building. They said they kept finding ways to improve the layout and features of the dealership to keep improving the experience of today's time-challenged customers.

"Truth be known, my architect is standing right in front of you," Ryan La Fontaine said, pointing at his mother. "We had one architect that did not work out. We kept changing it as we went."

Why go to all this green effort? "It's just the right thing to do," Maureen La Fontaine said. Added her son: "This demonstrates to our customers that we're willing to go the extra mile for them, too."

More at <http://www.lafontaine.com/>.

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