

ROLL CALL

Public Printer Wants to Paint the GPO Green

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The Government Printing Office's stately red brick complex on North Capitol Street is an impressive sight. Its eight floors of wide spaces and large windows take up an entire city block, with architecture that harkens back to the early 20th century.

Inside, the 1.5 million square feet of printing floors and office space make up the biggest printing and distribution facility in the world. A bit too big for Public Printer Robert Tapella.

He'd rather trade quantity for quality. Instead of the biggest building, Tapella will announce today that he wants GPO to have the most environmentally friendly building in the United States.

"If we can do it — and I don't know if we can — I would like to be the first LEED platinum printing plant in America," Tapella said, referring to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system. A platinum LEED is the highest rating that the U.S. Green Building Council gives to buildings. "It is difficult, but I think it's attainable."

The idea of moving out of the GPO building is hardly new; Tapella's predecessor, Bruce James, made it a priority during his four-year tenure — and never saw it reach fruition. But Tapella is taking that idea further, aiming for a custom-built, environmentally friendly place for the GPO rather than just a smaller building.

It's not his only goal.

On Thursday, Tapella will outline his plan for a more environmentally friendly GPO at a "Business of Green Media" conference at his alma mater, California Polytechnic State University. After years in the red, GPO is now financially stable — a time, Tapella is fond of saying, "to thrive."

Moving buildings is the cornerstone of his plan. But he also wants to increase recycling, produce 100 percent recyclable paper and replace 30-year-old printing presses with more efficient digital ones.

"I think it's absolutely terrific," said Dan Beard, the House Chief Administrative Officer. "I think he's doing absolutely the right thing. It's what major corporations in America are doing and what every major institute is doing. It's what we've been trying to do."

For the past year, Beard has been working on the Green the Capitol Initiative, a plan that aims to make the House carbon-neutral by the end of the 110th Congress. To this end, Beard is switching the House over to natural gas (from coal), purchasing renewable power for electricity and buying carbon offsets on the Chicago Climate Exchange.

Tapella's plan focuses more on the materials the GPO uses to print and distribute documents such as the Congressional Record, the Federal Register and the budget. Since the agency opened its doors in 1860, it

has recycled, Tapella said.

Today, the GPO sends a long list of its materials back to the printing industry for reuse, including photographic film, floppy disks, paint cans, aluminum and fluorescent light bulbs. Last year, that meant the recycling of more than 5 million pounds of paper and more than 200,000 pounds of metal.

"We're doing a lot of stuff on the recycling end and always have," he said. "It's always made good business sense to do that."

But now, he wants to do more, both in recycling and in limiting the amount of waste overall. The agency currently is looking into ways to reuse the solvent that cleans presses — one of the main contributors to the substantial hazardous waste the GPO produces. And in the long term, Tapella said he hopes the GPO will be able to offer 100 percent post-consumer wastepaper to federal agencies under a "GPO brand."

"The reason I'm doing this is because I think as a federal official, I have an obligation to be a good steward of the resources under my control," he said. "One of the biggest in our industry are the raw materials we convert."

How those materials are converted is another area that needs to be updated and made cleaner. The GPO now is using 30-year-old presses that waste a significant amount of material; Tapella already is looking at digital presses, possibly one where much of the process is done by the machine.

Such steps need to be taken or private industries will "leave the GPO in the dust," Beard said. But he voiced a concern that has troubled the agency ever since James, the previous public printer, began to move the GPO into the digital age: the work force.

Like any agency going through such a significant transition, the GPO has had difficulties with employees who feel new technology threatens their jobs. On several occasions, union leaders have criticized the agency for hiring too many high-paid employees to handle the new technology.

For his part, Tapella has promised tailored training for employees who need to learn the new skills.

Tapella already has assigned staff to determine the cost and long-term benefits of his green initiatives.

He's set to begin talks with Congress to pass legislation that will allow him to sell the North Capitol complex and use the money for a new building. And he's had a few meetings with environmental officials, scouted out some modern presses and began to write out a business plan called "A Greener GPO."

"The first graph has been written," he said, and then added with a laugh: "I don't like it. But we've taken that first step."