Paying for Performance

A growing number of colleges sign contracts with guarantees of savings of energy and money

BY MARTIN VAN DER WERF

TECHNICIANS are crawling over the campus of Ohio University, charting the use of electrical current in every office and dormitory room, measuring the brightness of lighting, the consumption of water, the air temperature in every room and alcove. They are trying to document every way that the university can cut its energy costs.

The answers are in little places. Ohio will replace 9,000 exit signs with exit lights that use 80 percent less energy and last 25 times longer. It will replace windows. It will put smaller, more efficient fluorescent tubes in the light fixtures. It will probably be watering its lawns and fields with well water rather than water from the tap. And, as a symbol of its turn away from a longtime reliance on coal, the university is considering buying its own natural-gas field, in the nearby hollows of the Appalachians.

It will be a 20-year project that will save millions of dollars per year in energy costs. Yet, to do it, the university won't have to come up with any new money up front.

In April, it signed a $25-million "performance contract" with Vestar, a subsidiary of Cinergy Corporation, a Cincinnati-based energy company.

HOW IT WORKS

Performance contracts are an innovative financing method that is increasing in popularity on campuses. The process works like this: A contractor or energy company explores a campus and recommends ways to save money on energy bills. Then the contractor makes the changes or hires others to make them, and guarantees, in writing, that the savings the college will realize will cover the costs of the changes, usually within 10 years. The company can also arrange financing, so the college does not have any upfront costs. The college pays the company for construction and equipment in installments that roughly equal the amounts by which the college is cutting its energy bills.

The companies benefit by selling more of their products. For many colleges, the greatest appeal of the contracts is that they can use the savings to help eliminate backlogs in deferred maintenance. Many of them use the savings to buy more-efficient chillers, ventilation systems, and other utility-related equipment.

"This is a way for many institutions to get capital quickly," says Mohammad H. Qayoumi, vice chancellor for administrative services at the University of Missouri at Rolla, who leads sessions on utilities policy at institutes sponsored by the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers.

"Are we going to see more? Definitely. We are going to see things going in that direction, especially with the deregulation of energy companies. They are increasingly going to want to sell electricity not only as a commodity, but all kinds of services along with it," he says.

University officials who have entered into the contracts point out, however, that the deals are immensely complicated. Any institution that is considering such a contract should consult with outside

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Sherwood G. Wilson of Ohio U. says its new energy contract will help it cover the costs of deferred maintenance.

experts, says Joe Kelley, executive director of facilities at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, which signed one of the first performance contracts by any college, an $18.8-million deal in 1990.

"We sort of had to find a pathway through the jungle on this one," says Mr. Kelley. His advice: "Get every word of it in writing."

Todd A. Zachwieja, principal of ZDS Design/Consulting Services an Ohio and West Virginia-based consultant on performance contracting, says there are now more than 100 companies in the business. The traditional market leaders are Fortune 500 companies like Honeywell, Johnson Controls, and Sempra Energy. Many of the newest ones are utilities trying to broaden their services.

AN UNTAPPED MARKET

The size of the market is difficult to quantify. Johnson Controls alone has about $1.6-billion in contracts, about 100 million worth with colleges, says Tom Proffitt, marketing manager for performance contracting at the Milwaukee-based company.

The college market, however, remains relatively untapped. Mr. Proffitt estimates that fewer than 20 percent of institutions have signed such contracts. But higher education has been a steadily growing segment of his company's business, he says.

Performance contracts were born in the 1970's, during the Arab

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oil embargo, when energy savings were at a premium. But they were not widely used until the mid to late 1980's, when they became particularly popular at hospitals, which could get some Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement for facilities improvements, says Mr. Zachwieja, chief executive officer of ZDS Design/Consulting Services, in St. Albans, W.Va.

Slowly, as states have passed laws allowing multiyear financing, elementary and secondary schools and local governments are beginning to sign the contracts. About 35 states have now enacted the laws, says Mr. Proffitt.

In 1994, President Clinton signed an executive order allowing federal agencies to make the agreements, and the contracts have begun to proliferate, mostly at military bases and at office buildings owned by the General Services Administration.

STAYING ON THE SIDELINES

Other than pioneers like Louisiana State; however, most higher-education institutions have stood on the sidelines.

Many were scared away by earlier performance contracts, in which hospitals and some government agencies didn't save as much as they expected. In the 1980's and early 1990's, the contracts were usually structured to give the company a share of the savings. Those incentives encouraged companies to maximize profits by doing the least amount of work to save the amount of money specified in the contract. But the long-term benefits for the institution were dubious.

Mr. Zachwieja, the West Virginia consultant, says that if colleges are careful about what they specify in their contracts, the real savings will come after the contract expires, as newly installed equipment continues to cut energy costs for years.

"Some companies are structuring contracts that only give benefits during the life of the contract," he explains. "You really aren't saving any money unless you get benefits that are lasting."

Louisiana State, for example, decided that it wanted all of the energy savings rather than sharing them, and, in 1992, bought out its contract with CES/Way International, an energy-contracting company, which has since been acquired by Houston-based Sempra Energy.

"We didn't really need the savings guarantee, because the savings were there, the technology was proven, and it was, in our minds, a low-risk project, so we took it over ourselves," says Mr. Kelley, the facilities director.

Colleges also feared losing control of the operation of their buildings, something that indeed came about in early contracts.

"Some schools have moved forward with contracts without fully understanding what they were doing," says Mr. Zachwieja. "Let's say they agree to a shutdown schedule — the lights shut down at a certain time, as opposed to before, when a custodian just shut down the lights on a room-by-room basis. Then the college decides to go to a nighttime-use schedule. Then it won't be able to produce the savings that were projected in its contract. How do you deal with that? All those possibilities must be considered."

Some college officials say they think such kinks have been worked out.

Sherwood G. Wilson, associate vice president for facilities and auxiliaries at Ohio University, believes that more institutions will sign the contracts as an answer to deferred-maintenance problems.

"We are faced with a backlog of deferred maintenance," says Mr. Wilson, who estimates Ohio's total at $55-million. "We have resources that fall a long way short of covering all of our needs." The contract will allow Ohio to take care of more than $10-million of the backlog.

Nationally, deferred-maintenance costs for colleges reached an estimated $26-billion, according to a 1996 report by the facilities-officers association. Chipping away at that total will become a big selling point as more companies approach colleges about the contracts, says Mr. Proffitt, of Johnson Controls.

"Everyone has looked at the K-12 market, and this has worked at K-12," he says. "You look at universities. There are greater bureaucracies, they may have credit issues, they have more-complex systems. Quite frankly, you go where the low-hanging fruit is, and that has been the school systems. The more-complex clients usually come later."

At Ohio, it took three years to get the administration, the Board of Trustees, and the state Board of Regents to approve the contract, mostly because of bureaucratic problems, says Mr. Wilson. When key financial people left, he had to explain and justify the contract to their replacements. It is one of the largest performance contracts ever signed by a university.

Then there is the cultural shift for a region where the economy is centered on energy consumption.

Ohio University has always been run by burning the very ground beneath it. Like clearing a forest to build a log cabin, the university has counted on nearby coal mines to stoke the boilers in the bowels of its sprawling campus.

But then came the Clean Air Act, and black-lung disease, and acid rain, and unemployment for many of the miners who dug up the ore that, in this part of the world, is particularly high in pollution-causing sulfur.

"We have tried to support the local industry, but this is even better," says Gene Mapes, an associate professor of environmental and plant biology and director of environmental studies. "I think this is a real leadership role, because we are modeling behavior." The university is trying to get area residents to acknowledge that the local economy must shift its emphasis from coal to tourism and small industry.

CREATING A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

Construction is set to begin in June on the first phase of the contract with Vestar, in which the company will make changes in nine of the 200 or so buildings on campus.

"Our math building is a huge building, with lots and lots of lights that are inefficient," says Mr. Wilson. "Our library is the same way." In addition, showerheads and perhaps toilets will be changed in two residence halls to models that use less water. The power plant will get new controls, which will more closely match energy production to demand.

This is the beginning of a relationship that is expected to last for 20 years, says Mr. Wilson. The project will comprise five phases, with one starting every two years. Each phase will have a guarantee that the costs will be repaid by energy savings over the ensuing 10 years. Ohio can terminate the contract after any of the phases.

SAVING $25-MILLION

If the university goes through with all of the phases, the contract guarantees that Ohio will save $25-million, although Mr. Wilson and Vestar officials have analyzed only about half of the seven million square feet of building space on the campus.

Construction costs in the first phase are estimated at $4.2-million. Ohio University is financing the project itself, probably with bond issues. Financing costs for the first phase are estimated at $23 1,000. If the changes in the first phase save $700,000 a year, as projected, the savings will have paid for the costs, including financing, in a little more than six years. Each succeeding phase will involve more-complex projects, with longer payback schedules. Plans are still being drawn up for those phases.

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Mr. Wilson says he has not calculated how much all of the work will eventually save the university. In the first phase alone, he says, the equipment being installed will continue to save Ohio $700,000 annually for 20 years. The total savings after subtracting the cost of the equipment and financing would exceed $9-million.

At Louisiana State, the annual energy bill before the performance contract was $12.5-million. Now it is about $8.5-million, even with 10 percent more students on the Baton Rouge campus, says Peter N. Davidson, director of energy services.

The contracts are structured to guarantee that the savings will cover not only the costs of construction, new equipment, and financing, but also, in some cases, a fee, generally ranging from 1 to 4 percent of the size of the contract, for a guarantee that the contractor will make up the difference if the college's projected savings fall short of expectations.

Usually, the savings guaranteed in the contract are about 80 percent of the company's estimated energy-cost reductions, says Michael Besspiata III, director of facilities management at Georgetown College, in Kentucky.

Johnson Controls last year paid out about 1 percent of the total savings it guaranteed but could not meet in its $1.6-billion worth of contracts, says Mr. Proffitt.

As performance contracts become more common, Mr. Besspiata says, any size institution can benefit. Georgetown College, for example, signed a $750,000 performance contract last year with Enertech, a subsidiary of LG&E Energy Corporation.

Mr. Besspiata moved to Georgetown in May 1998, from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Both institutions have fewer than 2,000 students. And each one now has modern energy-management systems, which tightly control energy use across the campus, paid for by the savings produced in performance contracts.

"I think a lot of colleges think they are too small to really get much benefit," says Mr. Besspiata. He projects savings in the current fiscal year of $85,000 on a typical annual utility bill of $1-million. "That's real money," he says. ■

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