

City Council gives green light for LED traffic bulbs

Officials approve \$16.4 million contract for pricier signals that could be a money saver in the long run

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Houston is poised to become one of a handful of U.S. cities to replace the light bulbs at all 2,381 of its traffic stops with energy-efficient bulbs that could save more than \$4 million a year in electricity costs.

Although the "light-emitting diode," or LED, traffic signals will cost 16 times more than incandescent bulbs, their seven-year lifespan is six years longer.

"We want to use energy-efficient lighting and make energy-efficient improvements for the same reason that Wal-Mart does, and that is to reduce costs and save money over the long run and to give Houston a competitive advantage," said Mayor Bill White.

The project is one of several "green initiatives" in the works at City Hall, including establishing new energy-reducing building codes, installing solar panels, buying renewable power and hybrid vehicles and vastly stepping up city recycling programs.

"It's one of those things they call a no-brainer," said Brandt Mannchen, a local leader in the Houston chapter of the Sierra Club. "We're the energy capital of the world. We could be the energy savings capital of the world if we could show that these technologies make sense and can save money. If Houston can do it, anybody can do it."

Siemens Building Technologies, the Buffalo Grove, Ill.-based company that won the \$16.4 million contract, will begin an inventory of city signal intersections before Christmas. Replacing all of the bulbs is expected to take up to two years, city officials said.

Because debt will be used to finance the project — paid for with funds from energy savings — the cost will go up over the life of the new bulbs by several million dollars, according to a detailed analysis produced by the Public Works and Engineering department.

The city did not seek competitive bids, but sought qualifications from various companies and negotiated the deal with Siemens, which will guarantee the energy savings annually. Under state law, local governments can secure contracts without bidding if they involve energy savings measures.

White expressed frustration with the delay in getting the deal under way, noting that there was a delay of more than a year from when Siemens was chosen until the matter came before council.

In a memo written for White this week, Public Works and Engineering Director Michael Marcotte said the delay was due to a variety of factors, including minority contracting goals, the departure of a city attorney and Hurricane Ike.

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