

# THE NEW COLLEGE HOUSE: SUSTAINABLE OR DISPOSABLE?



WRITTEN BY **KAREN CHI**

For many people, the New College House opening in the 2016 fall semester will be just another pretty building on campus. For the University Administration, the New College house will be a continuation of the ambitious Climate Action Plan 2.0, achieving LEED Silver certification for sustainable building design. However, in reality, the campus residency is not a paragon of sustainability as it will use disposable dishes in its dining hall. This dichotomy of sustainability certification and single-use plates demonstrates the shortcomings of the LEED system as well as the shortsightedness of Penn's planning process.



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LEED, or Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design, is a program that promotes sustainable building practices in order to reduce the ecological footprint of projects like the New College House. One important requirement for LEED certification is an initial meeting among all the stakeholders and sustainability professionals involved. Included in this discussion on the New College House were representatives from many of Penn's departments, such as Facilities and Real Estate Services and Business and Hospitality Services, as well as the architect (Bohlin Cywinski Jackson) and their consultants. The purpose of bringing each of these agencies to the table was to get a range of perspectives on topics from aesthetics, to operations and sustainability.

Yet, it was this multi-disciplinary team that both achieved LEED Silver, as mandated by President Amy Gutmann's Climate Action Plan 2.0, and chose to install only a single dishwasher in the New College House. Whether this deci-

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sion resulted from a lack of space due to the innovative building design, the lack of capital to pay for more elaborate construction, or the desire to reduce ongoing operations costs, the New College House will wash its forks, spoons, knives and cups, but throw away its plates for the foreseeable future.

To better understand this seemingly-paradoxical decision, “it is important to describe the dining facility at the New College House.” Pam Lampitt, the Director of Business and Hospitality Services, states that “at breakfast and lunch, the options will be retail only, once Hill has reopened from renovations. At dinner, platters will be available so that diners will be able to bring food to a table to share with their fellow diners, to build community within the house, along with traditional buffet style operations. The number of seats available is also much smaller than our other dining cafes and therefore the impact and the management of our entire operation including recycling will be significantly different.”

Mrs. Lampitt asserts that “while using disposable dishes may not be ideal, our plan is to fully support the University’s sustainability goals.” The final decision on the type of plate and other process details have yet to be made, but she affirmed that Business and Hospitality Services will engage the services of an expert in sustainable dining design to ensure that their choices won’t be adding to landfills. Mrs. Lampitt adds that “it is incomplete to concen-

trate solely on the use of disposables,” as there are plans for “the installation of a bio bin which will help facilitate effective composting of food and waste.”

University Architect, David Hollenberg, acknowledges that the issue of disposable plates is troubling, stating “I wish we were not doing this.” However, even “if someone came along and said, here is another chunk of money for you. Whatever you are doing for sustainability, do more. I am not sure we would have done dishwashers. We might have done more with water, we might have done more with heat recovery, we might have done more on any number of things that are more profoundly impactful on the carbon footprint than dishwashers.”

It is immediately obvious to any newcomer to the field of sustainability that throwing away plates after a single use is not a very environmentally-friendly policy. Yet, experts see other problems with the New College House that are even more significant. Even with a budget of \$127 million, the building has water and energy systems that are not optimally efficient; disposable plates are considered only a marginal issue in comparison. This leads one to wonder: what other, less visible, problems does the New College House have that make throwing away dishes a minor consideration?



The decision to use single-use dishes has been made and accepted, but both the Facilities and Real Estates Services as well as the Business and Hospitality Services emphasize that it is only temporary. Mr. Hollenberg states: “however the building functions on opening day will not be how it functions always,” noting that “there will be two plus years before the New College House and Hill are both operating, and we therefore will have an opportunity to re-evaluate these decisions and respond to student preferences.” Mrs. Lampitt concurs, describing a “great-



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not the spirit of real sustainability. There is a misguided mentality that attaining LEED certification is the final goal for building sustainability. Rather, Penn should go beyond and strive to create holistically sustainable buildings that demonstrate its vision, values, and pursuit of sustainability.

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er campus plan” that exists as a common goal at Penn, though different departments have different methods of achieving it.

Penn, as an institution, is known for its efforts in embracing sustainability; it sources more renewable electricity than any other institution of higher education and took progressive steps with its Climate Action Plan 2.0. However, the results of the New College House are far from perfect, showing that Penn is not a flawless system. Though the building earned LEED Silver certification, it seems apparent that the planners of the New College House followed the letter of Penn’s Climate Action Plan 2.0, but