University looks to hit energy reduction goal early

In an effort to reduce energy consumption on campus, the University has saved more than $15 million by cutting down its energy and water usage since 2009.

In 2009, President William Powers Jr.’s Sustainability Steering Committee initiated a University plan to reduce energy and water use by 20 percent in educational and general buildings on campus by 2020. With more than five years left to reach its goal, the plan has decreased usage on campus by 16.5 percent through University education programs and conservation methods.

The 16.5 percent reduction, while down 4 percent from last fiscal year, was up to 17.3 percent in May. Ana Thiemer, manager of the Energy and Water Conservation Program — which was started in 2012 to support the committee’s initiative — said the fluctuation is a result of the change in seasons and is expected when measuring energy.

“Over the summer, we had a really hot summer, a lot of failures in terms of equipment, and so things like that make our numbers go down,” Thiemer said.

According to Thiemer, the University is expected to meet its 20 percent goal in the next two to three years. She said the early completion date is a result of technical maintenance efforts and behavioral programs that teach conservation to University faculty, staff and students.

On the technical side, Thiemer said facilities staff members are monitoring buildings for potential energy waste, such as turned-on lights, leaky faucets or malfunctioning heating and cooling units.

An internal program called High Energy Response Operators instructs and encourages facilities workers to look out for repairs that could save energy.

“Our zone techs really do a good job in their preventative maintenance schedules in reporting problems back to us to help us all function correctly,” said Stephanie Perrone, project manager for the Energy and Water Conservation Program.

Perrone said that, over the past couple years, the University has been working to slow systems down, such as turning off the air conditioning when a building is not in use.

“To me that’s the key thing. When we got here, all of the buildings were running 24/7 all of the time,” Perrone said. “It was a big opportunity to jump on that piece.”
To change the consumption habits of those on campus, the Energy and Water Conservation Program also hosts energy saving organizations, such as Longhorns Lights Out, to encourage energy conservation and provides educational opportunities, such as Horns Up, Sash Down.

“A lot of people aren’t aware of how much energy is being used,” said Bryce Townsend, physics sophomore and intern in the program. “I think it’s kind of surprising. Just little things like turning off a light in a room can save so much money.”

According to Thiemer, the initiatives by the Energy and Water Conservation Program are not new this year, but the program has started to gather more feedback to refine its efforts, allowing its conservation to be sustainable.

“We’ve taken all of those initiatives, gotten feedback from participants, and now we are revamping them,” Thiemer said.

Thus far, the department’s efforts have not cost the University significant amounts of money, since they have been changes in maintenance practices and social awareness programs, Thiemer said.

Thiemer said the current reduction rates will not continue indefinitely, since there are only so many small things to repair. Eventually, the University will have to invest in more costly systems, such as air and light units that can be controlled and monitored outside the building, if the University wants current rates to continue, according to Thiemer.

“We have been doing everything with low to no cost,” Thiemer said. “There will be a time when that runs out, and UT will have to start investing in large capital improvements to keep continuing at the rate we are going.”