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DOING 'THINGS THAT WORK' ON A BIG CAMPUS

It's a good thing that Ron Swail loves a challenge. In the top FM position at the University of Toronto's St. George Campus, he's responsible for a vast and varied portfolio in which the average building age is 80

BY PAMELA YOUNG

There are 120 buildings on the University of Toronto's central St. George Campus, and Ron Swail is prepared to put a first-rate roof on each and every one of them — *once and only once*. "I always want to buy quality and maintain it so that it will last," says the man who holds the top facility management position at the 70,000-person campus. Accordingly, in 2005 he introduced a Sustainable Roof Standard to the university's bidding process. "It's a reflective roof with a 25-year unlimited warranty and it provides good insulation," he explains. "When that roof gives up the ghost, they can put on another layer and they'll give us a 15-year unlimited warranty. So for 40

A long-term thinker, Ron Swail is willing to put a first-rate roof on every building on campus — once and only once

years, nothing goes to landfill. I've said that I could be here for 25 years, and I don't want to replace a roof on the same building twice while I'm here."

He was with the university for a year as its director of Property Management and Maintenance before being promoted in 2003 to his present position of assistant vice president of Facilities & Services, but before that he honed his skills for two decades in the private sector. After attaining a B.A. in Psychology, Mr. Swail landed an entry-level position at Manulife Financial in 1983. He went from data entry to COBOL programming, but he didn't really love what he was doing until he moved into real estate at Manulife Financial. Over time he acquired expertise not only in property management but also in facility management, earning both RPA and FMA designations from BOMA. By 2000 he had risen through the ranks to become assistant vice president and general manager of Corporate Facilities at Manulife Financial. "It was an excellent learning envi-

ronment and I had great mentors there," he says, "but it wasn't an innovative working environment — you weren't really allowed to do something that was a little out of the box."

He describes the University of Toronto as "the absolute opposite end of the world" from his previous working environment: "It's completely non-hierarchical in the traditional business

sense. It's very collegial; everyone gets a say. Things don't get done as quickly, but on the positive side, you make better decisions when you have more information." For an individual who describes himself as "someone who needs challenge," it's a great place to be. He oversees a 620-person staff that consists of 18 functional units and has representation from eight unions. His portfolio, which has a replacement value of approximately \$3 billion, encompasses more than 12 million square feet and includes everything from residences to athletic buildings to high-tech labs. Mr. Swail definitely knows what it's like to work with aging stock: the average age of a St. George Campus building is 80.

A few years ago he took his three sons to Al Gore's live presentation of *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the presentation made such an impression on him that he still has the ticket stub. At U of T he championed a \$20-million energy reduction initiative involving a lighting retrofit and a chiller replacement program; it garnered millions of dollars in government grants, resolved some serious deferred maintenance issues, and is now saving the campus \$1.3 million in annual electrical expenses. Many other initiatives, such as installing a solar thermal array to play a part in pre-heating water for athletics-facility showers, or a new pilot program in electrical sub metering, could be discussed here, but suffice it to say that Mr. Swail's own favourite is the new office of the Facilities & Services and Real Estate Operations departments, which set efficient new space standards and last year became U of T's first LEED Gold-certified space. (It was profiled in the October 2009 issue of *CFM&D*.)

"I think you have to do things that work and people have to see that they work," Mr. Swail says. He considers it a privilege to serve U of T by finding ways to make its remarkable range of facilities work better. | **CFM&D**



Ron Swail