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Metro-North

IMMEDIATE

Grand Central Terminal's Iconic Incandescent Light Bulbs Switched to Compact Fluorescents

In time for Earth Day, MTA Metro-North Railroad has completed the conversion from bare, incandescent light bulbs to environmentally sustainable compact fluorescent light bulbs.

With more than 1,700 CFLs installed throughout the public areas of the terminal, the railroad expects to save more than \$100,000 a year on utility bills and more than 100,000 kilowatt hours in electricity. And because these bulbs last up to 10 times longer than incandescent bulbs, the railroad will save thousands of dollars on replacement costs.

Because of the need to maintain the aesthetic standards of the landmarked terminal, the switch to CFLs in public areas of the terminal was not possible until the introduction of bulbs that closely mimicked the shape of incandescent bulbs.

In 1913, when Grand Central Terminal opened, the streets of New York were still lit with gaslights. The bare light bulbs throughout the terminal were intended to be conspicuous: they fairly screamed: Electricity is here!

Now, 85 years later, Metro-North as the new steward of the Terminal, is touting new technology again in the switch to energy efficient CFLs.

The only exceptions are the 15 monumental chandeliers, which await development of dimmable CFLs, and the entrance marquees, which will be done in the near future.

"While we may be talking about improvements to Grand Central, there is nothing 'grand' about day-to-day efforts we, as individuals, can make to improve the environment," said Metro-North President Peter A. Cannito. "Whether it's switching to fluorescent bulbs at work or at home, or simply by riding the train instead of driving, we can all play a part in making the world a better place."

The transition to the new bulbs is consistent with the recommendations set forth in the interim report of the blue ribbon Commission on Sustainability and the MTA, convened in September 2007 by MTA Executive Director and CEO Elliot G. Sander. The report, released on April 14, called for greater energy efficiency, expansion of the MTA's use of renewable solar, wind and tidal power, improved building practices such as installation of vegetated green roofs on MTA facilities, and reuse of groundwater pumped daily by the MTA.

CFL bulbs have been improving in recent years so that their shape, color and luminosity is close enough to make the switch, according to GCT's Superintendent of Electrical and Mechanical Maintenance, Steven Stroh.

"These screw-in bulbs have a slightly thicker ballast (the metal part that screws into the socket) than incandescent bulbs, but the advantages outweigh this minor difference," Stroh said.

Because of Grand Central's landmark status, Metro-North's Director of Environmental Compliance, Karen Timko, in February sought permission from the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to change the bulbs in historic public areas.

"We applaud the efforts of the MTA to conserve energy and at the same time preserve historic aesthetics of the GCT light fixtures," SHPO said in a letter dated March 17, 2008. "Since the appearance of the proposed lighting matches the historic bulbs; it is SHPO's opinion that the substitution would have no adverse impact upon historic resources."

"CFLs save energy and manpower because they have to be changed less often," Stroh noted. "Incandescent bulbs use a thin filament that burns out fast partly because of vibrations caused by train movements. Compact fluorescents also are cooler. Incandescent bulbs get very hot and burn out the wiring and sockets much more than CFLs," Stroh said.

Behind the scenes and in locations where bulbs are covered or out of sight, Grand Central's transition to CFLs began years ago. Prior to SHPO approval, there were already more than 5,000 CFLs in use.

During the Terminal's 1996-1998 renovation, the glass catwalks in the monumental windows on the east and west of the Main Concourse were retrofitted with CFLs. In the Lexington Passageway, plug-in compact fluorescent bulbs were installed during the renovation because they are hidden by milk glass cones and can only be seen from directly below.

The iconic, four-sided clock atop the Information Booth and the chandeliers in the Graybar Passageway have had corkscrew CFLs for seven years. The white glass triangle fixtures over the ticket windows and the brass lights over the train gates have had corkscrew CFLs for years. Platform lighting was switched to 6-foot-long fluorescent tubes more than 20 years ago.

"In the yard, the brand we had been using for nearly a decade was recently discontinued," Stroh said. "We looked at sample bulbs from numerous vendors and rejected the corkscrew CFLs. We have to be able to change the bulbs using a light pole with a basket and the corkscrews get caught in the basket. The sample bulbs looked pretty good and that's when we decided they had come far enough in design that we could reasonably seek approval from SHPO to use CFLs in historic areas," Stroh explained. "There's been a lot of homework done on this."

Disposal of used CFL bulbs, which contain small amounts of mercury, will be done by Metro-North's waste management firm, Waste Technology Service of Lewiston, NY. The mercury, glass and metal all will be recycled.