A local startup has launched an online program that lets Milwaukee homeowners track their water use and earn credits for conserving water that can be redeemed for discounts at area restaurants and other businesses.

Residents can analyze their quarterly water usage data from the Milwaukee Water Works by entering their water utility account number and creating a free account at h2oscore.com. Residents can see how many gallons of water per day they consume at home and how their household compares with neighbors in a quarter-mile radius.

Young and his students in a Marquette water policy and environmental ethics course developed H2Oscore in spring 2011. More than 75 students have been involved in the project in the past 18 months, although H2Oscore is managed day-to-day by a three-person team.

The social venture is run by Young at Marquette’s Kohler Center for Entrepreneurship, which named Young a 2012 Entrepreneur Faculty Fellow. While organizations and companies exist that provide similar water usage analytics and water conservation tips, Young said H2Oscore’s focus is engaging the community and providing incentives for water sustainability.

“Providing conservation tips is not the challenge,” Young said. “The challenge is incentivizing and motivating those efforts.”

The discount program could be crucial in encouraging conservation, especially because people don’t tend to fret over their water bill as much as they do their energy bill or filling up at the gas pump, said Dean Amhaus, Milwaukee Water Council president and chief executive officer.

“Whatever anybody says, water is still very, very cheap,” Amhaus said. “If we can incentivize (conservation), that’s important.”

H2Oscore began a pilot program in Whitewater in June, and Young hopes to launch in Madison later this year.

Currently, the main revenue source is advertising fees paid by businesses that join the rewards program. Young said H2Oscore has been helping some partners track their water usage for months, and simple changes have already yielded results. La Merenda is using 116 fewer gallons of water per day compared with last year and has saved $2,100 this year on its water bill, according to Young and La Merenda owner Peter Sandroni.

“Our sales have gone up, yet our water usage has gone down,” Sandroni said.

The main reasons — switching to lower-pressure water faucets and nozzles and asking customers if they want a glass of water, instead of automatically pouring it, Sandroni said.

Although H2Oscore has helped Sandroni lower his business’ water bill and the rewards program will help market the restaurant, he said the social impact of water conservation is also important to him.

“Water’s such a cheap commodity that everyone takes it for granted and I think people need to be aware of how much they’re consuming and how much of an impact they have on each other,” Sandroni said.

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General Capital buys Fond du Lac apartment buildings

General Capital Group LLP, this month paid $1.45 million for two affordable housing properties in Fond du Lac with a combined 80 apartments.

The deal was purely an investment, and the apartments will remain reserved for low-income residents, said Steven Schnoll, partner in General Capital Group LLP, Fox Point. The two buildings, both dubbed Lakeside Gardens, are at 689 E. Scott St. and 391 N. Peters Ave. Each has about 40 apartments.

A company related to affordable housing tax credit investor Sun America Affordable Housing Partners Inc., Los Angeles, sold the buildings, Schnoll said.

The Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority financed the purchase, Schnoll said. General Capital may seek WHEDA affordable housing tax credits for more serious renovation work on the buildings, but not until after 2013, he said.

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