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## Hotel Updates

# On-Site Sustainability Stars

These three environmental stewards are leading their meetings facilities on the path to green excellence.

By William Ng

March 2, 2011

Practically every single meetings hotel or resort these days is operating green to save on costs and be more efficient internally, and not to mention satisfy environmentally conscientious clients externally. Behind the scenes at each of these these properties, there is usually an environmental leader whose sole job is to make sure that his or her facility is a lean, green machine. And these on-site sustainability officers also step out from behind the curtain to assist groups that arrive with green meetings questions. *Successful Meetings* recently spoke with three such stewards.

At Stowe Mountain Lodge, in Stowe, VT, a Destination Hotels & Resorts property, Andre Blais is officially the landscape manager but has become the on-site champion of the chain-wide Destination Earth eco-program, which, in turn, has a green meetings program. Says Blais, "Each property champions Destination Earth. Sometimes, it's a group of people, sometimes it's one person, traditionally from the engineering department. I often address groups and explain our efforts."

Often, groups with green meetings experience already have established criteria and goals and are simply looking to vet their suppliers. Blais lends his hand to the Stowe Mountain Lodge group sales team when it needs to present detailed sustainability information to such clients. "A lot of the inquiries are about our [back-of-house] waste management, purchasing, F&B operations," says Blais. "Groups want to know the organizations and suppliers we're affiliated with."

Seventh Generation, the popular maker of sustainable household products based in nearby Burlington, VT, was one of those groups. Now, Blais says, it holds meetings at Stowe Mountain Lodge because of the like-minded business ethics and values the organization and the property share.

For groups that are still new to green, Blais advises planners on standard meeting options and further

add-ons available at Stowe Mountain Lodge. The resort always has recycling bins in all meeting rooms, provides white boards instead of flip charts, and distributes water and condiments from vessels instead of single-serve packages at meal service. When groups demand flip charts specifically, it provides them with ones with recycled paper. And organic F&B and bio-based flatware, plates, and cups are ready on request.

Although Blais acknowledges that organic food may derive additional costs, he educates groups about the quality, benefits, and lower environmental impact of the farm-to-table philosophy—especially for those looking to support the local businesses at places they meet. "They're celebrating local agriculture, and costs are trending down as organic farms receive greater business and regulate their supply and demand better," he notes.

But when Blais is not helping his group-sales colleagues, what is he doing? Part of his responsibilities is to help the Vermont resort—and its meetings customers—quantify on-property conservation efforts. Currently, Stowe Mountain Lodge diverts 200 annual tons of waste from landfills for a 75 percent conversion clip. It also possesses certifications from Audubon International and Green Key Global.

Being in Stowe, where local lifestyles are intertwined with Vermont's bountiful mountains and countryside, Blais says it was second-nature for him to jump at the opportunity to lead Stowe Mountain Lodge's green efforts. Says Blais, "Although I'm the green champion here, it's truly a group effort. I corral everything and make it happen. We're celebrating the environment we're fortunate to be in."

### State of Green in the Peach State

In Atlanta, planner, attendee, and staff education is a big goal, as well, for Tim Trefzer, the Georgia World Congress Center Authority's (GWCCA) first-ever sustainability coordinator. One of his customer-facing projects is to develop a green meetings and conventions program that can be tailored to fit incoming groups' levels of interest and moxie. "We need to [formally] show convention managers what we're capable of. I'd like to increase the signage and visibility of our recycling," says Trefzer. He adds, "Each show gets a [negotiated number of] Dumpsters, anything after that they're paying for it, so it behooves groups to recycle."

Trefzer will undoubtedly look at two Microsoft meetings last year as models for his green confabs schematic. At Convergence, a four-day Microsoft Dynamics customer conference last April, 36 tons of the 57 tons of produced waste were diverted from landfill; 4.2 tons of plastics, aluminum, paper, and glass were recycled; and 1.4 tons of cardboard were baled and recycled. Levy Restaurants, the GWCC's caterer, donated 1.5 tons of unused food to the Atlanta Union Mission and sent 29 tons of organic waste to a local composter.

Last August, Microsoft's MGX convention of 11,300 attendees produced 75 tons of waste, of which 49.1 tons were diverted. The GWCC baled and recycled 4.8 tons of cardboard and 6.7 tons of aluminum, glass, and paper. The use of water coolers in breakout rooms saved 1.6 tons of water

bottles. Levy Restaurants donated 1.7 tons of food and sent 31.7 tons for composting.

"Not all groups will be [committed] to that level, Microsoft is very encouraging of recycling from both us and its visitors, but we want those who come into our building to choose green," Trefzer notes. For all events at the GWCC in the near future, energy consumption will be analyzed and incorporated into cost-savings schemes for its customers, he says.

Internally, Trefzer, a designated Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Accredited Professional hired at the end of 2010, is expected to take the GWCCA campus, comprised of the GWCC, Georgia Dome, and Centennial Park, to the next level with its sustainability goals. Although the buildings formed green teams nearly three years ago and operate with green practices that include composting, they seek a unified, campus-wide sustainability strategy with a quantifiable system.

LEED EB certification, for existing buildings, is also in sight. The convention center is currently LEED-registered, meaning it can begin the road to certification, which entails audits and improvements of the building's inner workings from energy and water consumption to waste diversion—in a process known as retro-commissioning. At the beginning of the year, the GWCC received a \$2.3 million grant from the federal government to retrofit all 1,500 lighting fixtures and controls in its 12 exhibit halls, with the aim of reducing energy use by 25 percent.

"We've got to determine our energy efficiency, [HVAC] refrigerants used, how much outdoor air we're getting in here," Trefzer says, running off a list. "The GWCC has three buildings, the oldest built in 1976, making up a huge facility. We're going to take baby steps, continuing to do projects and establish milestones, while looking at the big picture."

### **Racing to Sustainability in Wisconsin**

Lois Berg, director of administrative services at The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, a nonprofit focused on environmental issues in Racine, WI, has been overseeing the sustainability work at the organization's Frank Lloyd Wright-designed conference center, as well as a 42-room guest lodging facility, since 2006. Although the conference center, which the architect named Wingspread, and the guest house are reserved for the nonprofit organization's own meetings, Berg chairs the International Association of Conference Centers' sustainability committee, using her experience to help establish green standards for other conference centers.

Since becoming committee chair in early 2009, she has updated IACC's Code of Sustainability covering 55 tenets over nine areas: education, waste management, recycling, reuse, water conservation, purchasing, energy management, air quality, and F&B. More than 123 IACC properties adhere to the code at three levels—platinum (100 percent adherence), gold (85%), and silver (75%)—giving them competitive cachet with green-minded groups. Under Berg, the code now mandates that a certified property has to have an on-property green team, a formal environmental policy that can be shared with staff and meetings customers, and a commitment to seek innovative conservation methods.

By meting out a formal list of best practices, IACC is arming its properties with sustainability talking points and information that they can readily share with meeting planners and their stakeholders. "From talking to IACC members, government clients will not even have meetings at [properties] that don't follow sustainable practices," says Berg. "It's becoming more and more important; guests are looking for that." Adds Stephen J. Ricci, conference services manager at The Conference Center at NorthPointe, a silver-tier property in Lewis Center, OH, "Following IACC's code, we spent [2009] building our commitment to green practices and found that people were quoting the code." IACC members provide feedback on the code to Berg's sustainability committee and re-up annually.

Serving leadership-level meetings on governmental, business, and institutional environmental policy, Wingspread has to be a prerequisite for sustainability excellence. The 42-room Guest House is LEED EB-certified and Green Seal-certified at the Gold level. And the campus uses an energy-efficient chiller that, in turn, uses a geothermal field, rather than municipally supplied water, for cooling—saving the city of Racine more than 1.5 million gallons of water per year.

"The people attending our conferences are environmentalists, so they're knowledgeable, even critical, about our green practices," says Berg. "We have made it a choice to absolutely eliminate bottled water and have bulk containers for amenities."

Like green stewards at many organizations, Berg started out with the low-hanging fruit on the road to sustainability and recommends planners begin the same way: "What we're doing here, others are doing too."