

Convention Center offers green gatherings

Beth Casper 9:18 p.m. PDT August 14, 2015



(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)
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In a place that hosts close to 100,000 people and more than 600 events a year, sustainable practices make a big difference.

The 30,000-square-foot Salem Convention Center has slashed its garbage through composting and recycling, while generating the majority of its own energy and educating others about going green.

“It’s not just lip service,” said Alan Pennington, waste reduction coordinator at Marion County. “These guys meet and exceed EarthWISE standards. It’s like they are trying to be the greenest company in Oregon.”

The EarthWISE program is a free business environmental assistance program of Marion County. EarthWISE staff helps businesses recycle, save energy, reduce waste and much more. To earn certification, a business meets criteria in six areas. The Salem Convention

Center is one of more than 150 EarthWISE businesses and organizations in Marion County.

The Salem Convention Center became EarthWISE certified in 2008.

The Convention Center's composting and recycling efforts have reduced their garbage from six to eight dumpsters a week to two dumpsters a week. Most of that reduction came from food composting — 58 tons of it in 2012 alone, banquet manager Robert Maple said.

Republic Services picks up the food waste — items like vegetable stems, fruit peels, meat bones and cheese ends. It's dumped at their food composting site where it breaks down into dirt to be added as a soil amendment to farms or backyard gardens.

The other major reduction in waste came from setting aside bottle caps, corks, straws, Styrofoam and plastic film in addition to all of the typical recyclables collected in the commingled recycling bin. Agri-Plas, a local plastics recycling company, collects the plastics not allowed in the hauler's bins.

The kitchen also separates the used cooking oil for processing into biodiesel at the Sequential Pacific Biodiesel plant in Salem. In 2012, 1,055 gallons of cooking oil from the Salem Convention Center was turned into fuel for diesel vehicles.

Leftover food that is still edible is donated to Union Gospel Mission to feed the homeless. The convention center donates enough food, on average, for 600 meals a week.

Salem Convention Center manager Chrissie Bertsch also is cognizant of the amount of energy a warehouse-sized building can use.

"We save a lot of power in a lot of different ways here at the Salem Convention Center," Bertsch said. "We use low-wattage fluorescent lighting throughout the facility. Our lights all have motion sensors so they shut off automatically when these spaces are inactive. Our heating and cooling system is also regulated by controlled scheduling and uses rainwater captured in our very own water tower to heat and cool our building."

In the underground parking garage, two spots are dedicated to electric vehicles and feature charging stations.

In March of 2011, the Salem Convention Center installed 450 locally sourced solar panels that generate more than 340 kilowatt hours of energy each day.

The solar energy is featured at a solar panel monitoring station available for viewing by the public.

The education component is a key piece of sustainability for leaders at the Salem Convention Center.

“We not only want people to understand what we are doing and why, but we also want them to take home some knowledge about what they can do to be better stewards,” Bertsch said.

The Salem Convention Center was built with salvaged materials seen every day by the public. The terrazzo floor was made from material from the building that was demolished for the convention center. The wood floors in the Willamette foyer are made from recycled plywood ends.

The Salem Convention Center’s sustainability ethic runs deep. Each of the almost 80 employees has a specific orientation on green practices and is required to review the product recycling procedures. Everyone receives regular staff education about sustainability. The company-wide green team constantly evaluates current practices and possible new practices.

Employees who go above and beyond are recognized on a huge concrete column labeled “Tree Hugger.” Employees’ handprints and their names and date decorate the column, which stands as a symbol of the convention center’s commitment to sustainability.

For more information about the EarthWISE program, go to www.mcEarthWISE.net or call (503) 365-3188.