

A new focus on sustainability

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BBHC shifts to greener operations

Buffalo Bill Historical Center facilities manager Paul Brock sums up the center's sustainability efforts this way: "As a museum, we're charged with keeping artifacts in our collections good forever; we're keeping things good for our grandkids' grandkids. Really, sustainability is about your grandkids' grandkids and the Earth — keeping it good for them."

A member of the "green committee" formed two years ago at the center, Brock is one of the main forces working toward a greener museum.

"(The green committee) formed because we felt it was our responsibility as a museum and a leading entity in this area.

With our connection with Yellowstone and our mission of education — it became our duty to take on sustainability as a museum and to spread the message to our visitors and the community."

The movement at the BBHC started in small steps, with changes like recycling containers in the break room.

"We talked about it as 'first, employees; second, visitors; and third, community,'" Brock said. "We asked, 'How can we impact our visitors?' And how can we go from recycling in the break room to recycling at the front door?"

In April 2008, the museum took it a step further and joined the Yellowstone Business Partnership's UnCommon Sense program. The mission of the program is to "(equip) businesses to make desired changes in their operations and (empower) them to become sustainability leaders in their communities and industry sectors."

According to Heather Burdette, the Yellowstone Business Partnership's sustainability programs manager, "It started as a way for businesses to look at their operations in a bigger picture. There are lots of educational opportunities, but this was designed as an implementation program.

"This is a two-year program with peer support and a leadership team to help with setting up systems to track changes," she said. "People ask, 'Is what I'm doing making a difference?' The BBHC can quantify their energy and water savings."

Since then, the steps toward sustainability have grown.

The BBHC will graduate from the UnCommon Sense program in May, and Brock says the changes they've made at the museum are significant.

Employees are now issued reusable, biodegradable coffee cups in place of disposable cups; there are recycling containers at the front door and in food-service areas, and the custodial staff favors biodegradable cleaning products.

"We've saved \$10,000 a year in the restaurant by not purchasing disposable stuff. We use all washable, reusable dishes," Brock said. "In the old days, we would go through 50,000 trash bags a year. We've cut it to 5,000. Every employee is responsible for their own trash, and they take it out when necessary — not every day."

The museum also uses a huge amount of water every year: 5 million gallons of treated water, 50 percent of which is used to balance the humidity in the building, and 8 million gallons of untreated water to water the grounds. According to a BBHC fact sheet, if the water the center used was put in one-gallon containers, it would make a line of milk jugs from Cody to somewhere between Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

In looking for ways to decrease water usage, the center faced some unusual obstacles. Because of the dry climate in Wyoming, maintaining the interior humidity is critical to the integrity of the collections. Therefore, cutting use of treated

water wasn't terribly feasible, so they turned their focus outside.

By using a new, organic fertilizer in the sculpture gardens, the water use in the two areas was reduced by 30-50 percent.

According to Burdette, "I think the water issue is a huge success story for them, given their constraints."

Brock said the green committee was able to move forward with its mission of creating a more sustainable operation because of the strong administrative backing that came from Bruce Eldredge, the museum's chief executive officer.

"By the time Bruce came on, they (the YBP) were able to show us the history," Brock said. "Without an administration that felt strongly about it, we couldn't have gone anywhere."

According to Brock, there's been an improvement in employee morale as a result of their participation in the program.

"It's really fascinating that a sustainable-practice program can have an employee benefit," he said. "When people realize they can make a difference and have a voice, especially with things they're passionate about, they can bring it to the workplace. The energy level is incredible."

Nineteen employees are signed up for an employee garden that will be planted this spring behind the museum. The garden will use compost made with pre-consumer waste from the center's restaurant. For now, the produce is destined for their own homes.

Brock envisions continuing and expanding the museum's green revolution into the future.

"We're looking at LED lighting, we're increasing insulation, removing old boilers and tying into the central plant," he said.

"We'll look at global warming and greenhouse gases..."

"One thing we really push here is champions. Employees aren't assigned to the recycling program as part of their jobs.

They have to volunteer. I tell them, 'If you are passionate about something, bring me your ideas. I'll say, 'OK, will you champion your cause for me?'"

In that way, they've been able to incorporate some smaller areas of recycling — such as batteries, aluminum and printer cartridges.

"I tell people, 'Why not pick one bottle up?' No, one bottle doesn't save the Earth, but if you don't pick it up, you're not setting a good example for your kids," Brock said, then added with a laugh, "I say it's saving the Earth one bottle at a time."

For more information about the Yellowstone Business Partnership's UnCommon Sense program, contact Burdette at 406-600-6617 or visit the Web site at www.yellowstonebusiness.org.