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Turning Green Into Gold

Santa Monica is way out front as it certifies eco-friendly businesses

~ By MINDY FARABEE ~

Los Angeles has long been known as a business-friendly city. But only in neighborly Santa Monica would you find a city-friendly business.

“I just wanted to help them out,” explains Dave Lackman, owner of local watering hole Library Alehouse. “When I heard the city was starting a business component to their greening program, I thought, that’s a no-brainer.”

A literal Main Street business, Lackman’s popular pub has catered to Santa Monicans since 1995, building up a loyal walking-distance clientele with its low-key ambiance, microbrews on tap, and organic snacks on the menu. It’s also endeared itself to the community with a history of enlightened business practices, such as its “Non-Profit of the Month” program, which 12 times a year funnels a minimum of \$1,000 to neighborhood favorites like Santa Monica Baykeeper.

So when the city’s Environmental Programs Division asked him to participate in a pilot program that would develop a methodology for certifying “green” companies, Lackman – who had run his own home through the city’s residential greening program back in 2001 – jumped at the chance. “I wanted to help them figure out what works for the restaurant business and help ? get more businesses involved so we can make a bigger difference,” he says.

Officially called the Green Business Certification Program, it launched in late October by endorsing five enterprises in addition to the Alehouse – luxury hotel the Ambrose; clothing retailers Patagonia; vegan deli Euphoria Loves RAWvolution; alternative energy consultants Gladstein, Neandross and Associates; and natural grocers the Co-Opportunity. City officials say in the first week alone, five more businesses signed on to complete the simple three-step process (checklist, assessment, inspection) confirming they also adhere to a set of environmentally-sound criteria.

In return, these businesses will get some advertising discounts in the local media as well as extra boosting on their behalf, but mainly their reward is a decal to stick on their front window, a jaunty logo emblazoned with a perky little stick figure brandishing a leaf. Because, in Santa Monica, being green is definitely a path to gold.

Nicknamed the “People’s Republic of Santa Monica” during a late-’70s push to install the country’s strictest rent controls (since rolled back), the city has kept some of its reputation, and even sported a

Green Party mayor a couple of years back, as it struggles with gentrification and how and whether to rein in liberal social policies serving the area's growing homeless population. But mostly it leans left, and as such has modeled a number of green strategies for municipalities around the world.

As scientists have made clear, combating global warming will require a patchwork approach, trimming a megaton of emissions here, altering development patterns there, and replacing dwindling fossil fuel reserves with a mix of wind, solar, and other renewable energy supplies. With the recent Democratic Congressional takeover – and a notable environmental shift marked by the ouster of anti-environmentalist Representative Richard Pombo and the arrival of freshmen Senator Jon Tester, the organic farmer from Montana – expectations have risen dramatically that Washington will soon address climate change and environmental degradation in a meaningful way.

But until a coherent and comprehensive federal policy emerges to tackle the issue, local governments around the country are weaving together a patchwork of regional initiatives. Santa Monica is one of only 25 cities in the country to have anything like a Sustainable City Program, where coordinator Shannon Parry helps oversee the green business program as part of Santa Monica's larger vision, which includes the city's pledge to cut its greenhouse gas emissions to a level 15 percent below 1990 standards by 2015.

“Participation by our business community is essential in meeting that target,” says Parry. “This isn't a silver bullet, but looking at the energy and water reductions it requires, we know we're getting some level of measurable reductions, and a lot of small numbers in aggregate have an impact.”

Los Angeles can't help looking a bit less than green in comparison, even under the eco-friendly administration of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. This past week, former Santa Monica mayor Michael Feinstein – he of the Green Party affiliation – suggested his hometown break off from Los Angeles County, joining forces with Venice instead to carve out its own governing body, and thus seize more power over its own ecological and development policies. No one currently in city hall seems to be echoing those sentiments, but earlier this year officials did announce that the city's ecological footprint has shrunk almost 6 percent since 1990, showing that the city is more than happy to set precedents for the county.

It's this kind of philosophy that makes Lackman and others so partial to life in Santa Monica. “I'm having a hard time finding a place to open a second location,” he says. “I can't find anywhere else that offers me what Santa Monica offers.”