



The Oregonian

The cost of sustainability fame

Portland spends \$60,000 to parade its green attitude and innovations at a conference

Tuesday, November 13, 2007

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CHICAGO -- If anyone doubted Portland's conviction that its brightest future is as the center of the sustainable development world, consider that City Hall flew at least 15 people to Chicago last week to a conference on green building -- and the Portland Development Commission sent another three.

Join that with the city's stylish PDX Lounge -- the only such reception space in a meeting of about 22,000 design types from around the world -- and you have a tab that likely exceeds \$60,000, though specific figures are yet to be available.

"The world watches Portland, believe it or not," said Kath Williams, immediate past president of the World Green Building Council. "Portland's got to stand up and take its rightful place as the future."

And it did.

As Portland officials worked the floor and City Commissioner Dan Saltzman announced that the city would soon ask builders to boost energy efficiency or pay hefty fees, dozens of highly specialized Portland engineers and architects took on the unlikely profiles of rock stars.

The 500 seats in Room W-475 of Chicago's convention hall could not contain the crowd yearning to hear Andy Frichtl of Portland's Interface Engineering. About 100 stood at the back of the room for about an hour. Hundreds stayed around for a second hour to prod, provoke and understand him.

His subject? Earth-smart design -- or how he helped integrate an environmental laboratory into a spring-fed trout hatchery planned near the Interstate 205 Bridge in Vancouver. Almost no detail was too technical, too arcane to share.

The reverence -- and job-building promise it holds for Portland officials, among them Mayor Tom Potter -- was plain. And it fit the assessment by Phillip Bernstein, a vice president of AutoDesk Inc., the \$2 billion-a-year building industry software company: "Portland is the heartbeat of the whole sustainability movement."

The Greenbuild International Conference and Expo is the world's largest conference of building industry manufacturers and designers with an interest in energy-efficient, sustainable structures -- Oregon Health & Science University's South Waterfront office building being a prime example. More than 850 companies bought trade-show booths.

Portland's footprint was larger by far than any other city except, perhaps, host Chicago. More than a dozen Portlanders led premier seminars and were listed in the program as sustainability experts.

Seattle, too, had more than a dozen residents leading workshops. But neither Seattle nor Vancouver, B.C. -- joined with Portland and Northern California as the "Silicon Valley of Green Building" -- had a visible marketing presence.

"This is about staking out a position in people's minds -- not for just selling stuff that already exists, but putting in motion changes that will create the next generation of businesses, whatever they are," said Joe Cortright, an influential Portland economist. "It could play out in transportation or planning or health care. It's a source of innovation and dynamism for the economy in the long term."

It's also a talent magnet. Frichtl, the Portland engineer, led one of 200 workshops, out of 1,200 proposed. He got to stage a presentation on his own dime -- yet enjoy the benefits it might bring to his firm: "It attracts

good talent to us. We get good engineers saying, 'I want to do what you're doing.' "

Portland's cachet helps.

"When we say come work for us -- we can say come work for us and work in Portland," said Norma Dulin, marketing manager for PAE Consulting Engineers in Portland. Paul Schwer, PAE's president, led a workshop with Portland State University professor Jennifer Allen and Gina Franzosa, of the Portland-based Cascadia Green Building Council.

The last slide for all three groups?

"We're hiring"

That was considered a little racy by the typical Greenbuild workshops, which tend to focus on the technical. But some Portlanders threw in a little swagger.

At a session about OHSU's South Waterfront building, Interface Engineering's president, Omid Nabipoor, was detailing how the building forged new ground in water conservation. Developer Dennis Wilde, also on the panel, interrupted.

"The water bills in the building have been running less than \$100 a month," he said.

The audience gasped.

"That's for a 400,000-square-foot office building -- so match that!"

Applause erupted.

At PDX Lounge, meanwhile, Portland worked a separate magic. Dance music pulsed from the PDX Lounge sound system, while Full Sail beer and Medoyeff Vodka flowed from its two bars.

On the night Saltzman made his announcement of a carbon fee system for new buildings, the space was deliberately a "logo-free zone" -- the dozens of companies that designed and built the space agreed not to display signage. That would have felt too much like the conference's exhibition hall, where 10-foot-tall logo-screaming banners ruled.

It made for some unlikely business introductions.

"When could I ever get a face-to-face meeting with someone like Bob Packard?" quipped Dulin, of PAE Consulting Engineers. Packard is a managing partner of ZGF Partnership, Oregon's largest architecture firm, which sent 21 staffers to Chicago, including 12 from Portland. A good impression on Packard might help produce future business for a 60-person firm such as PAE.

Urban and rural Oregon met in the lounge, as well. State economic development officials paid the sponsorship fee of six rural forest products manufacturers. The small firms donated materials for the lounge and covered their own travel and registration expenses.

In all, nearly 60 companies spent about \$200,000 to be represented in PDX Lounge.

As for Portland's investment, officials were confident the trip was worth it.

Tom Osdoba, economic development manager for the sustainable development office, said the government travelers tried to economize while staying in downtown hotels.

Potter, Saltzman and Anderson stayed just one night. Osdoba and other OSD workers, including Anderson, had roommates -- his was Saltzman's chief of staff, Brendan Finn.

"We recognize this is a pretty big effort and a lot of money," Osdoba said.

The flights, car trips and electricity burned by some 20,000 convention-goers generated nearly 19 million pounds of greenhouse gas emissions, the Leonardo Academy estimated.

But dial back the hypocrisy meter: The Wisconsin-based academy, which focuses on sustainability, raised more than that in carbon offset donations before the conference started, including 25 million pounds of "carbon dioxide sequestration credits."

Still, if Portland's big footprint -- and investment -- was such a good idea, why didn't other cities have at least a trade show booth?

Several applied for one, but they were too late and left on a waiting list, said Williams, program coordinator for the Greenbuild conference. Portland had a booth for PDX Lounge last year and paid a year in advance

for a booth at this year's show -- which sold out a year in advance.

Such exposure reinforces Portland's leadership position, unquestioned by people such as Sue Wuest, assistant director of the Urban Affairs Center at the University of Toledo, in Ohio.

During a cab ride to see former President Clinton's keynote address, Wuest had one last question: "So, who from Portland should we invite to come speak to us about this stuff?"

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