

Green lodging conference embraces eco-capitalism

By Joann Eisenbrandt

Composting. Recycling. Energy-efficient lighting. Everyone knows these are good for the environment. Organizers of the West Coast Green Lodging Conference taking place Aug. 22-25 at Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe are convinced they're good for a hotel's bottom line as well.

Embassy Suites, the conference host, has been in the forefront of environmental sustainability at the lake, implementing over the last several years a number of green initiatives that have significantly reduced the hotel's carbon footprint and shown a profit for the property.

David Hansen, Embassy's director of engineering, has been a driving force in this effort. Terming himself an "eco-geek," Hansen emphasizes, "Lodging uses 25 percent of all the energy in the U.S. If we can attack this sector of the economy, think how much energy we could save."



David Hansen is the leader of green lodging in Lake Tahoe.

He "got the green bug" while working for Robert Redford as

director of facilities at the Sundance Ski Resort, where he built a totally-sustainable day spa. “I was addicted,” he said. When he came to Tahoe to work at Embassy Suites Lake Tahoe Hotel & Ski Resort, he was determined to turn it into a sustainable property.

The four-day Green Lodging conference brings together hotel general managers, chief engineers, innkeepers and owners to share ideas on sustainability as it specifically relates to hotel operations. Tahoe was an obvious venue. The Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce website lists 82 member entries under the “accommodations” category.

“The Lake Tahoe Basin should rightfully be the world’s sustainability leader,” Hansen believes.

Conference speakers, including Hansen and chamber President B Gorman, will address why and how to go green and the benefits it affords the individual property and its community. Participants will also have the opportunity to take a “back-of-the-house” tour of Embassy Suites’ Green Program in action.

The conference keynote speaker is Glenn Hasek, publisher of the Cleveland-based *Green*



Glenn Hasek is the keynote speaker at the Green Lodging Conference.

Lodging News, an online portal for the lodging industry

offering a potpourri of green information and links. A former managing editor at Hotel & Motel Management Magazine, Hasek is sold on the wisdom of Green Lodging. As he told *Lake Tahoe News*, "Green lodging is synonymous with smart lodging. It's running your business in the most efficient manner possible, using green technology and green teamwork."

But after all, business is business, so green lodging advocates are quick to point out that going green isn't synonymous with going broke. Given the right planning and management, the additional costs of some changes, like replacing Styrofoam serving ware with compostable plates, cups and utensils, can be more than offset by cost savings gained elsewhere by boosting income from recycling and greatly-reduced power and water bills.

"For corporate America," Hansen believes, "environmental sustainability might not be a driving factor, but saving money is. It's eco-capitalism – saving money and saving the planet at the same time."

Eco-capitalism is putting down roots in the lodging industry. Creation of a nationwide Green Lodging Association to represent the industry is being seriously talked about. Twenty states, including California, now have Green Lodging programs. The state's website offers information on building, buying, traveling and working green, a listing of 200 green hotels in California as well as some convincing statistics on the impacts lodging properties have on the environment. For example, average-sized hotels purchase more products in a week than 100 families do in a year and use 218 gallons of water per day per occupied room.

Locally, a visible "green-mindedness" has emerged. Aramark's Zephyr Cove Resort and Fire & Ice at Marriott Vacation Rentals have joined Embassy Suites in South Tahoe Refuse's pilot commercial composting program. STR picks up the properties' compostables (plates, cups, utensils and food waste) and

transports them to Full Circle Compost in Minden. Compostables, unlike biodegradable materials, break down completely into soil, water and carbon dioxide.

Jeanne Lear, human resources manager at STR, says of the innovative pilot program, "We're hoping the costs and benefits of these sustainable practices will be able to be expanded to other commercial properties."

Compost Tahoe, a grassroots organization of community sustainability advocates, offers composting education, including a program in which volunteers go to local food service establishments and train employees in sustainable food waste practices. South Lake Tahoe is developing its own Green Building Program, and has added a Sustainability Commission to its roster of community advisory groups. The Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce initiated a Sustainability Measures Project, is holding green forums for businesses and formed a Green Business Cooperative, where local businesses can share ideas and get support for implementing sustainability practices.

Why this spike in interest now?

"The economy has tanked," Hansen explains. "Tahoe isn't drawing the gaming crowd as in the past. What we are about is this pristine lake, the environment; we should be showcasing that. We should be purchasing locally, reinventing our own area. Business is what allows us to live here."

But green lodging won't work if the traveling public doesn't buy in. Hasek's blog has a posting seeking participants for a Green Traveler Survey conducted by CMI Green of San Francisco, which will gather information about lodging purchasing practices and how much they are impacted by a property's green policies. Last year's survey showed travelers are embracing the "green" changes.

Hasek and Hansen agree. Hansen says at least 50 percent of

their guests are “ecstatic” about the hotel’s sustainability program. For the rest, the changes are so subtle they’ve gotten no complaints. For the most part, they’ve been so well-integrated into hotel operations that they go unnoticed.

Registration for the West Coast Green Lodging Conference is from \$300/person with room rates from \$149/person. A conference program and registration information are available [here](#).