

Opinion: Innovations in green lodging keep industry progressive

By David Hansen

I had the privilege of hosting, as well as speaking at the West Coast Green Lodging Conference this week at the Embassy Suites Lake Tahoe. This was the second annual conference here on the South Shore and I must say it was very inspirational to hear leaders in the industry speak about their accomplishments as well as hearing from the EPA, local advocates of sustainability and other great speakers.

The conference kicked off Aug. 21 with a reception and a welcoming by Bill Cottrill, director of sales and marketing for Embassy Suites. On Monday morning we begin the conference with a welcoming speech from Dominic Acolino who is the general manager of the Embassy Suites and turned it over to our keynote speaker Douglas Rath, director of energy and environment for Marriott International. Doug talked about energy reduction, the consumers demand for a green product and the fact that Marriott currently has 67 LEED certified hotels in the U.S. and their goal is to have 300 LEED certified properties by 2015. I found Doug to be very informative and I was quite amazed at what Marriott International is doing for our planet.



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We then heard Wendi Shafir, LEED AP from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, who is in charge of the EPA's Western Region Green Hotels and EPA Programs. Wendi spoke about why hotels need to go green and all of the many programs out there the EPA has to assist lodging properties with their sustainability programs. Wendi is very passionate about what she does and I would encourage every Lodging property to go to the EPA Energy Star website and sign up for Portfolio Manager which is a tool to benchmark your properties sustainability efforts and learn what other properties are doing.

I was next and had two tough acts follow. I spoke about the success the Embassy Suites Lake Tahoe has had with our sustainability program and where we need to go next in our efforts. I also spoke briefly about the importance of greening the lodging industry and partnering with other properties and people in the community. I gave a tour of our property's green efforts that was filmed by Donna Walden from UNR's Business Environmental Program. This film will be used in several areas including programs at UNR to show what one property can do and why it is important.

Next up, we had the privilege of hearing about two major hotels in San Francisco that have obtained LEED certification. Harry Hobbs, director of engineering for the InterContinental Hotel of San Francisco spoke about what it takes to be gold – LEED gold. Harry taught us about the process of getting LEED certified and the extensive efforts that were made in order to achieve gold. The InterContinental in San Francisco is 100 percent carbon neutral, which is an amazing feat.

The hotel partnered with the Department of Energy, Pacific Gas & Electric, as well as IHG to achieve its success. But having met Harry I can assure you that he was the driving force that made it all happen.

We then heard from Michael Pace, general manager for W Hotel San Francisco that has obtained LEED silver certification.

Michael talked about a “passion driven” approach to sustainability and how to create a hotel with a green conscience, not a green hotel. Michael is an amazing speaker and has added some fun, and what he calls “sexy” things to do with you sustainability program. The W is a lifestyle hotel that has amazing design features and embraces lifestyle, arts, music and entertainment. Michael taught us to not just be eco-friendly, but be “eco-fabulous”.

The W in San Francisco hosts what he calls an “ecoliscious” cocktail hour each evening and 10 percent of the proceeds go to Save the Bay in San Francisco. I was very inspired by Michael and received some great ideas about making green fun. Michael also spoke about the importance of keeping the brand identity of the hotel, but still pushing the boundaries of brand standards in order to be more environmentally friendly.

Our final speaker on Monday was Roxanna Lopez, operations manager- U.S. Region for Green Key Global. Green Key is the largest third party green certification program in the world for the lodging industry. We learned about how a hotel can get started in going green. According to Roxanna, each property’s success can be more easily obtained if it is a collaborative effort amongst the staff. This is why it is so important for properties to have a “Green Team” made up of management and employees. She also spoke of the importance of recognizing team members who are “caught in the act” of doing sustainable things in their daily work.

The first day was so amazing I couldn’t wait for Day 2 of the conference as we had more great speakers lined up. We started Tuesday with Jack Eichhorn, director of global meeting services for Oracle Corporation. Oracle is a huge corporation that annually hosts 8,000 meetings worldwide. Jack spoke about how Oracle is influencing and partnering with meeting venues worldwide to have green meetings. Oracle has created green guidelines for all of its events. They have a Global Green Team that focuses on 4 R’s – Rethink, Reduce, Reuse and

Recycle. They are also creating sustainable purchasing criteria for use in guest rooms, meeting space and catering.

I found his speech to be very exciting in the fact that this huge corporation is on board with sustainability and is building it into their events. Way to go Oracle.

Our next speaker has an incredible story to tell. Dean Parker, executive facilities director for the Peppermill Spa Resort & Casino in Reno, showed us how the Peppermill became the largest and maybe the only resort in the world operating its entire 2.2 million square foot facilities' heating systems, mechanical hydronic HVAC systems, domestic hot water, swimming pools and hot tubs solely off of geothermal energy. This is so cool to have a super large casino in our backyard showing the world how things should be done.

Dean worked on this project for a year and a half and the shared with us the many challenges and risks the Peppermill took to make this project work. At one point during the project Dean had to go to the owners to let them know they had drilled down 4,000 feet and had a dry well. The ownership decided to "roll the dice" and put a few more million dollars into the project that eventually brought up 174-degree water from the Earth at a depth of 4,421 feet. The Peppermill has also removed most of the natural grass on the campus and installed turf, saving thousands of gallons of water. They plan to remove the additional natural grass in the near future.

I instantly had visions of doing geothermal here in the Tahoe casino corridor and am looking forward to touring the Peppermill soon.

Next we had a local legend Craig Witt, owner of Full Circle Compost, speak alongside Jeff Tillman of South Tahoe Refuse. Craig and Jeff spoke about the partnership between the community, STR and Full Circle Compost. Jeff gave us a video

tour of the recycling programs South Tahoe Refuse has. If you ever get a chance to tour the STR facilities, I would highly encourage it as it is amazing what they are doing to help the environment. Craig spoke about commercial composting and how it works. Craig put on quite the comedy show for us as well by explaining it all to us with his hilarious sense of humor. This was a great part of the conference as we all laughed and relaxed and enjoyed hearing about the world of composting. Craig had some great quotes, none which had the appropriate language to be shared with all of you in this article.

Deanna Meredith was our next speaker. Deanna is a program specialist and eco-concierge for the LodgingSavers Program. She spoke about PG&E's LodgingSavers program which is designed to provide no cost full scale integrated and comprehensive energy audits with the industry's highest caliber mechanical engineers and LEEP AP's to assist properties with improving their Energy Star score with a road map to LEED certification with emphasis on existing buildings steps to achieve their long term sustainability goals. I found Deanna to be a wealth of knowledge and could have talked to her for hours.

Our final speaker is someone who has spent more than 20 years in the Lake Tahoe Basin working on sustainability in many areas. Nicoletta Florio, owner of Green with NV, spoke about sustainable lodging and finish green. Nicoletta was the perfect speaker to wrap up the conference as she not only showed us what the lodging and travel industries can do to be more sustainable, she encompassed into her presentation how humans have affected the forests, the oceans, marine life and pollution and how since we created the problem, it is our responsibility to clean it up.

We wrapped up the conference with a fantastic dinner prepared by our own chef Sal Delgado and closing words by Tiffany Zabaglo, director of catering services for the Embassy Suites and our General Manager Dominic Acolino.

This year's conference was sponsored by General Electric, Leviton Manufacturing, Advanced LED Products, ClearWater Tech Ozone Systems, EnLink geoenergy, and California Meetings and Events.

The conference was very successful and it was great to see the enthusiasm of each attendee, speaker and sponsor. We all learned something that we can take back to our prospective places of business and expand on our sustainability efforts. We will be making plans soon for the third annual conference.

David Hansen is the director of engineering for the Embassy Suites Lake Tahoe Hotel as well as the chair of the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce Green Business Co-op.