

Sustainable Lisle Business Partnership

By Catherine Schuster

GREEN BY CHOICE

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sustainable lisle

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

By Catherine Schuster

How does a municipality with limited resources facilitate sustainability within the community in a cost effective, timely manner? Can a sustainable focus positively impact the economic vitality of the area? What is the role of economic development in this process? These are some of the questions answered in the following article which reviews the village of Lisle's Sustainable Business Partnership, Green By Choice.

Green By Choice is a program for Lisle businesses that helps them meet the needs of consumers, while reducing waste and conserving natural resources. Participating businesses receive a green audit, agree to offer sustainable products/services, and incorporate sustainable practices into their operations. Members display signage that thanks consumers for their support and promotes a Green Directory of Lisle Businesses, which is located on the village's website. The directory reviews members' green products/services, sustainable operations, and highlights special green initiatives.

The village of Lisle is located 26 miles west of Chicago in DuPage County. Home to the world-renowned Morton Arboretum, it is known as "The Arboretum Village." From its vibrant corporate corridor to its beautifully redeveloped nature-themed downtown, Lisle has evolved into a community of 22,400 people and more than 1,000 businesses, including the international headquarters of Navistar and Molex. In 2007, *Money Magazine* named Lisle as one of the top 20 "Best Places to Live in America," citing economic opportunity and the high quality of life available in the village.



Spring at the Morton Arboretum

A NATURE BASED HERITAGE

In 2006, the economic development director partnered with the firm Tandem Design Strategic Marketing to refresh Lisle's brand and communications, which were originally inspired by the Morton Arboretum's 1,700 acres of woodlands, wetlands, prairies, lakes, meadows, and tree conservation activities. The following brand promise was created and approved by the Village Board in 2007:

Home to the Morton Arboretum,
Lisle's Unique Sense of Place
Is Infused with Nature whose Powerful Presence
Energizes People, Sparks Innovation and
Inspires Creativity.
It is a Community that Intelligently Blends
Innovation with a Respect for Nature
To Offer Outstanding Work, Life and Visitor
Experiences.

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Lisle's appreciation for nature and the environment was inspired by the Morton Arboretum and is reflected throughout the community. The village's largest residential development, the 744-acre Green Trails Subdivision, contains 25 miles of trails, nine lakes, 17 public parks, mature woods, grassy open spaces, and hills and flatland. Hundreds of residents volunteer at the Morton Arboretum and participate in recycling programs that were initiated decades ago, before it became common practice.

During the past few years, the village and other community organizations began implementing a significant number of eco-friendly initiatives. In 2008, Lisle co-hosted the Sustainable Cities Symposium presented by Illinois Lt. Governor Pat Quinn and the Illinois Green Governments Coordinating Council. Lisle also received a Clean Air Counts Award for the village's commitment to clean air initiatives and reducing ozone in the Chicago region.

In 2011, the village earned the Earth Flag Certification from the respected environmental education organization, SCARCE (School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education), and incorporated an array of eco-friendly practices into village operations. The concept of sustainability was expanding from the residential to the municipal and organizational sectors of the community.



DuPage County Board Member Jeff Redick, Lisle Village Trustee Ed Young, and Mayor Joe Broda at the Earth Flag presentation.

THE ORIGIN OF GREEN BY CHOICE

A number of evolving circumstances led to the creation of the Green By Choice program. Residents, local organizations, and the village were increasingly becoming more sustainable. However, it was difficult to ascertain what sustainable initiatives were occurring within the local business community. Retail trends started to reflect the consumer's increasing interest in identifying and supporting sustainable businesses. The recession was in full swing and local businesses were seeking ways to differentiate, increase sales, strengthen customer loyalty, and reduce operating costs. Many businesses were curious about the concept of sustainability. SCARCE began offering green audits to encourage businesses to become



Above: Green By Choice decal that members display in storefronts.

Left: Green Directory located on village's website.

more sustainable. The village hired a new management analyst in part to implement and manage general sustainability initiatives.

Village staff recognized that encouraging the Lisle business community to become more sustainable would benefit the environment. Tandem Design Strategic Marketing believed it would also help reinforce the village's brand, provide a competitive advantage to the community, and provide a consistent message to the public. The economic development director, management analyst, and Tandem Design Strategic Marketing worked together to create the components and strategy for the Green By Choice program.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Initially, the Green By Choice program was called the Sustainable Lisle Business Partnership. Technically, "sustainable" was the correct term to use. However, the Downtown Business Council felt that many consumers might not fully understand "sustainability" as it was just being introduced to mainstream America and was not very engaging. It believed the public would respond better to the more familiar term, "green." At the same time, the Village Board wanted to ensure that the program was offered on a voluntary basis – that individual businesses could choose to participate. Businesses also liked the fact that they made a conscious choice to become a member. Hence the name Green By Choice evolved and seemed like a natural fit. However, to help educate the public, Sustainable Lisle Business Partnership remained part of a logo that was specifically designed for the program.

GREEN BY CHOICE PROGRAM

The program was first introduced to local businesses during an educational seminar, coordinated by the economic development director. The seminar reviewed current retail trends including the consumer's rising interest in sustainability. It also introduced the proposed Green By Choice program.



Benedictine University intern Matt Brown conducts a green audit with Aquascape's Gina Mangra.

The economic development director then met individually with more than 50 businesses to discuss the program in greater detail. Interest was strong and the majority of businesses agreed to participate in the first step, the green audit.

SCARCE agreed to perform 50 green audits and educate businesses about how to become more sustainable. The audit reviewed water and energy usage, air quality, recycling efforts, waste production, operations, purchasing practices, products, services, and more. It recognized current sustainable initiatives and provided a list of practical eco-friendly recommendations which businesses could choose to adopt. The majority of the first 50 green audits were completed within approximately two months.

Business owners were very interested in becoming more sustainable and appreciated the personalized recommendations offered by SCARCE, which were specific to their respective industries. Owners reviewed the results of their green audits and agreed to offer at least two sustainable products or services and incorporate at least two sustainable initiatives into their operations. In an attempt to encourage initial widespread participation in the program, membership requirements were very reasonable. However, members exceeded these basic requirements and many conducted special green activities that had a global impact.

Members received decals that were displayed in store fronts and colorful table tent cards for store interiors. These items thanked the public for supporting the green business and encouraged people to review the entire Green Directory of Lisle Businesses on the village's homepage at www.villageoflisle.org. The directory listed each participating business, the date of the green audit, green products/services offered, sustainable operations and highlighted special green initiatives. Members were also given permission to place the Green By Choice logo on marketing materials such as ads, business cards, and websites.



Lisle Business Recycling Event.

Initially, the program was marketed using a number of cost effective channels including newspaper articles, ads, web promotions, and village communications. Later, joint marketing programs helped promote the program using a new website that had been created, www.refreshinglygreen.com, and via radio, TV, and print ads.

Complementary activities, such as Lisle's first Business Electronics Recycling Event, augmented the program.

RESULTS

The primary goal of the program was to encourage the Lisle business sector to become more sustainable, reduce waste, and preserve natural resources for future generations. The program also served as an economic strategy to give businesses a competitive edge in the marketplace, helping them respond to consumer demand for increasingly green products, services, and responsible business operations. The program positively reflected Lisle's distinctive nature/green brand as "The Arboretum Village," reinforced the village's identity, and presented a unified, consistent message to the public.

It became clear that any business could become more sustainable in the context of its unique product and service offerings. Initially, businesses were concerned that becoming more sustainable would be expensive. However, they soon realized that going green could result in

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Heart of downtown Lisle located at the entrance to the Garden Walk, a landscaped walking path that winds through downtown.

cost savings or be cost neutral. Business owners adopted a new mindset, looking at their operations with a new perspective and realizing how their actions contributed to society – in terms of current and future impact.

When SCARCE could no longer perform the green audits due to other commitments, the village's economic development and human resource directors approached a local educational institution, Benedictine University, to propose the creation of a Sustainable Internship program. The university was excited about the program and promoted the opportunity to students. Both directors interviewed candidates and selected Matthew Brown, who had an interest in sustainability, as the intern. After receiving training, he was responsible for expanding the Green By Choice program. He presented the program to interested businesses; conducted green audits, reviewed results with businesses; prepared listing sheets for the Green Directory; delivered marketing materials; and organized the first Electronics Recycling Event for local businesses. When the internship ended, village staff continued to manage and expand the program. To date, Green By Choice has 79 members and continues to grow.

AN INCLUSIVE PROGRAM

Initially the program was created for businesses. However, major organizations also agreed to join the program. They included the Lisle Area Chamber of Commerce, the Lisle Convention and Tourism Bureau, the Morton Arboretum, and the Lisle Park District. Green By Choice reflected and supported the ongoing sustainable initiatives of these entities. For example, local hotels utilized sustainable practices in their operations and offered "green" vacation and event experiences. The Convention and Tourism Bureau marketed the village as a "green" destination. The Morton Arboretum had been a leader in tree conservation for decades. The Park District's mission focused on connecting people with a healthy environment. Support from these major organizations was very much appreciated, helped validate the program, and reflected strong community partnerships.

DIVERSE WORLD OF GREEN PRODUCTS/ SERVICES

Consumers from Lisle and the surrounding area patronize Green By Choice businesses and learn about sustainable products, services, and operations. Local businesses present a diverse array of sustainable offerings including:

- Fountains using harvested rain water, rain barrels, solar powered bird baths;
- Organic food, beverages, catering options;
- Alternative energy investments;
- Sustainably produced cabinets;
- Green premiums/awards;
- Electric vehicles;
- Eye glasses made from recycled frames;
- Soy based printing inks;
- Organic pet, clothing and hair care products;
- Green dental practices;
- Green lodging and event experiences;
- Energy efficient lighting;
- Bags made from recycled juice boxes;
- Locally produced artisan crafted wood furniture;
- Decorative sculptures made from recycled materials;
- Green pre-school activities;
- Programmable thermostats, energy efficient equipment, bamboo flooring, eco-friendly insulation, low flow faucets;
- Repair services that extend the life of shoes, luggage, knives, boots, and more; and
- Heirloom preservation services.



The prairie style downtown.



Green By Choice members – Lisle Dental Center, an eco-friendly dental practice and Wild Birds Unlimited.

While the program originally focused on retail businesses, offices have also become members. Businesses began purchasing from other members. For example, a Green By Choice office building used a Green By Choice florist to provide air cleaning plants for a three-story office building. Green By Choice members purchased green cleaning supplies from other members.

ECO-GIVING

Program members participate in a number of sustainable charitable activities, some with a global reach. These include: donations to the Pathways to Nature Conservation Fund; providing clean drinking water to distressed countries; eye glasses donated to church mission groups; bikes donated to Working Bikes, which supplies bikes to rural countries for transportation purposes; collections of gym shoes, tires, batteries, anti-freeze, oil, light bulbs, quilting supplies, hangers, plastic bags, cans, eye glasses, and shoes; donations of wedding dresses and tuxedos to local organizations; sponsorship of highway clean ups; and green travel and meeting tips.

GREEN CREATIVITY AND NEW GREEN BUSINESSES

Some businesses have identified creative ways to re-use products including: transforming empty wine bottles into glass flower pots and lamps, wine corks into name holders, and quilting scraps into fabrics that are used in distressed countries. These businesses also provide free sturdy wine boxes to people who are moving and give used picture frames and mats to crafters for reuse.

New sustainably focused businesses are coming to the village, bringing jobs and depending on the type of business, sales tax revenue. Examples include: Air Cycle, which recycles fluorescent lighting for large commercial customers; Aquascape, which offers beautiful fountains using harvested rain water; Tailored Space Cabinetry, which provides eco-friendly cabinetry and remodeling services; Lisle Dental Center, an eco-friendly dental practice; and Leeco Steel, which produces materials for wind

energy products. Each new sustainable business reinforces and strengthens Lisle's green brand.

MUNICIPALITIES AND BRANDING

Municipalities are beginning to understand that, like businesses, they need to differentiate themselves to attract residents, businesses, investors, and visitors. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through the development of an authentic brand. The Green By Choice program was a logical, meaningful extension of Lisle's brand as "The Arboretum Village." The program has served as a unifying theme, reinforcing the village's green/nature based brand and providing a consistent, relevant message to the public.

COST EFFECTIVE

Green By Choice was a cost efficient program to implement. Businesses received complimentary green audits – first from SCARCE, then from the Benedictine University intern, and village staff. Local newspapers and magazines published articles about Lisle and the Green By Choice program and featured a different participating business on a weekly basis. Members also placed ads in special green advertising sections of the local paper to help promote the program to the community.

The majority of the Green Directory was produced in-house and placed on the village's website, eliminating printing costs. A Green By Choice Twitter account – Go Green in Lisle – was created and used to promote the program. Ads and promotions directed people to the website to review the Green Directory. The initial launch and promotion of the program totaled approximately \$7,900; professionally produced decals, tent cards, and support materials cost \$2,900; and another \$5,000 was allocated for an initial marketing campaign, which included print advertising and encouraged people to view the Green Directory on the village's website. Funding came from the economic development director's marketing budget.

Subsequent marketing efforts included joint marketing programs with other local organizations, references

in a nine-minute video (2011 IEDC General Purpose Promotion Award Winner, “The Arboretum Village” Video), a 30-second Comcast cable television commercial, and the 2011 Community Profile, a brochure that presents an overview of the community used in attraction efforts. Most recently, a new Facebook page was launched which uses a theme that reflects the village’s sustainable focus, ENJOY! GREEN! LISLE!

Independent recognition of the program is growing. For example, the economic development director was a presenter at the Delta Institute’s Green Town Conference in Chicago. In addition, Green By Choice received the IEDC’s 2011 Sustainable/Green Development Project Award, within its population category.

LESSONS LEARNED

Implementing the Green By Choice program yielded the following lessons, which may prove useful to those seeking to implement sustainable programs in local communities:

1. A municipality needs to take the lead in initiating sustainability within a community for maximum impact and should lead by example.
2. Engaging in activities that are good for the planet can also be an effective economic strategy, helping existing businesses thrive, attracting new jobs, and increasing sales tax revenue.
3. A sustainable focus takes time to develop and must continually be nurtured until it becomes second nature.
4. Green products/services must be comparable or of a higher quality than traditional products to obtain and maintain consumer support. They also must be priced reasonably so they are affordable for the average consumer.
5. Program costs can be minimized by using local resources and partnering with diverse stakeholders. For example, local resources included SCARCE, Benedictine University, and a local business owner who hosted the Business Electronics Recycling Event in his large parking lot.
6. Remaining flexible and adapting to change can net positive results. For example, when SCARCE could no longer perform green audits, Benedictine University was approached and an Internship Program was developed. The intern engaged was specializing in the sustainable field, did a great job, and received a valuable learning experience. The Internship Program helped strengthen the relationship between the village and Benedictine University, as both parties appreciated each other’s assistance.
7. A successful sustainable program can have a global impact. Many members conduct sustainable charitable initiatives that benefit a global audience.
8. “Green” transcends age and affects behavior changes in generations of people. A high school ecology club partnered with a grocery store that became a Green By Choice member, while a Green By Choice



Nature-themed downtown.

preschool conducts green educational activities for its children. Any business or organization can become more sustainable within its context.

9. Finally, while sustainability is a universal concept, in this case it authentically reflects the village’s heritage and brand. The program logically builds upon the community’s prior sustainability efforts. While residents and organizations initially led the way, Lisle’s business community has recognized the important role it plays in preserving the environment for future generations.

PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS

Several ways to improve the program have been identified. Attractive one-sided clings were used as decals which businesses displayed on windows and doors. However, decals can be easily peeled off and can only be read from one side. Using more permanent double-sided stickers, not clings, would resolve the problems experienced.

Visually appealing table tent cards were given to all businesses so they could be displayed throughout stores to help inform consumers and spark conversation. Restaurants were given enough table tent cards for each table. These items were often moved around, damaged or inadvertently placed in hard to see locations. Some were blown over by the wind as consumers entered the businesses. Consequently, village staff needs to periodically revisit businesses to remind them to keep the support materials front and center and to replenish supplies. Going forward, more permanent, sturdy support materials need to be used.

To ensure the program’s effectiveness, employees must be educated about Green By Choice and “buy-in.” Turnover is a reality in the retail environment. Business owners need to constantly reinforce the program as it is most effective when the decals and tent cards prompt a discussion about the store’s participation in the program.

Employees can also proactively approach customers to talk about the program and the store's green products/services, but this can be challenging for some employees.

Reduced municipal budgets and staffing makes routine visits to all program members challenging. Interns can provide valuable assistance and broadcast emails can also help members stay connected and involved. However, actual site visits are most effective. If members of the Village Board participate in these visits, they become even more valuable.

ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Green By Choice related activities such as establishing and maintaining a consistent, authentic village brand; creating programs to support the brand; facilitating the vitality of the business community; and improving the quality of life for present and future generations are economic development related activities. Economic development staff can play many roles in initiating a sustainability program including:

- Helping to establish a community's brand and communications strategy,
- Developing programs that reflect and strengthen the community's brand,
- Implementing programs that help increase the vitality of the business community,
- Creating marketing materials,
- Organizing and participating in educational presentations,

- Promoting programs to local businesses and obtaining buy-in,
- Identifying and working with diverse community partners to assist with program execution and to minimize costs,
- Interacting with the media, and
- Troubleshooting problems.

AN EVOLVING PROCESS

The sustainability movement will continue to evolve. New terminology may replace the current terms – “green,” “eco-friendly,” and “sustainable.” Innovation and new technologies will offer unimaginable solutions to serious ecological problems that threaten the world today. Sustainable initiatives will become accepted standard operating procedures. However, change takes time and perseverance.

Many sustainable initiatives involve regional or national policy changes and require significant financial investments. The Green By Choice program is educational in nature, can be implemented relatively quickly and in a cost effective manner – making it an appealing program for any sized community, but particularly for those with populations under 50,000 with limited resources.

The village of Lisle's Green By Choice program makes the journey to sustainability seem clearer and more achievable. It helps turn the page on non-productive, wasteful practices and ushers in new ways of operating that reduce waste and conserve resources for future generations. 🌍

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