

MELA BOARD REPORT ON SUSTAINOVATE CONFERENCE 2009

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Sustainovate '09 is an annual conference sponsored by the Foresight Design Initiatives' Chicago Sustainable Business Alliance (CSBA). The purpose of Sustainovate is to, "create a knowledgeable community purposed with empowering its members to better address relevant issues and subsequently, develop more robust enterprises dedicated to the pursuit of greater sustainability." To this end, the conference pursued five topic areas in order to provide a structure for various discussions:

- 1) Credibility – define what tools and strategies exist
- 2) Communication – how prominent should sustainability values be internally/externally
- 3) Transformation – how to successfully manage the complexity with embracing greater sustainability
- 4) Value – how to address value to shareholders, brand, employee and customer
- 5) Impact – measuring value

The task was to explore how and if the above could be related to MELA's mission to "develop and promote standards and best practices for sustainability in the green industry ... (to) pursue goals through education, advocacy and networking." The goal in attending the conference was to answer a series of questions, share with the MELA Board about the participants in the conference and determine possible synergies for growing MELA.

Attendees included marketing consultants, food providers, educators, printing companies, technical writers, green banks, real estate developers, to name a few. Breakout sessions were very informative and helped to answer the following questions.

- 1) *How develop buy-in to sustainability?* What was stressed was working backwards from the vision – then creating the tools, researching the impact

and communicating the vision. Communications was stressed as the key to buy-in. For MELA, things to consider are: in addition to education programs, MELA should develop active committees and task forces with expertise in product development, legislation, and practices of existing green landscapers and landscape architects. LEEDs certification would provide legitimacy to industry practices. Therefore, MELA may consider becoming the leader in this area by developing the standards and becoming the certifying body for LEEDs guidelines. (More on this later.)

- 2) *How approach equipment providers to develop greener equipment?* Some participants, such as Ori Sivan of Green Depot (green building products) ended up getting into product development and private labeling because of problems with finding good suppliers of green products. Others were able to find local sources, depending upon their type of business.

Current legislation and certifications (LEEDS) are encouraging manufacturers to create the products. For MELA, development of a database of manufacturers of sustainable equipment and chemicals would put the association in a liaison position to facilitate communication between the manufacturer and the end-user.

An important strategy for creating change, as emphasized by Michelle Jost, Director of Sustainable Practices at The Shedd, is to be in tune with the current “hot buttons”, using them to facilitate change and encourage products to equal development. They used this effectively at The Shedd because water conservation and re-use is hot with the City of Chicago and the Chicago Climate Task Force.

The **Chicago Climate Task Force's** *Chicago Climate Action Plan* (see attached) could be a template for MELA to determine which hot buttons might be useful for encouraging change.

Additional sources whom I either met or was referred to – one a recycler for other companies (Ken Dunn) and the other a landscaper and former ILCA President (Scott McAdam) who practices green; might provide some insight and information useful to MELA on products, practices and services currently available.

- 3) *What and who are the resources for helping MELA to develop a proposal for stimulus monies for MELA initiatives?* Foresight Design Initiatives and their CSBA, could become useful resources for how other firms and organizations have obtained monies. Laura Flannigan, a consultant with Five Winds International, helps clients obtain funding for their green initiatives. She may be useful to MELA on an informal basis.
- 4) *What organizations should MELA know about?* Foresight Design/CSBA has developed a new policy group to act as a voice for business with legislators as well as new sustainable organizations. Being part of that voice

The Chicago Climate Action Plan outlines five strategies...

The Chicago Climate Action Plan outlines five strategies, which are broken into 26 actions for mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and nine actions to prepare for climate change. The Chicago Climate Action Plan details steps for organizations of all kinds and suggests actions for every individual. The Plan is a snapshot in time -- the actions detailed in the Strategies section draw on current technology and options now available in the market. As new technologies and options emerge, actions may change. The goal, however, remains the same: to reduce our emissions and prepare for change.

might be useful to MELA. In addition, Peter Nicholson, Executive Director of Foresight Design Initiative, would be a good

resource for helping MELA to further develop its mission, by understanding how Foresight developed into the sustainable organization and recognized force that it is. As mentioned previously, the Chicago Climate Task Force might also be a useful organization to engage in dialogue since the landscape industry equipment and practices have an impact on CO₂ emissions and water use cited in the *Climate Change Action Plan*. Understanding the

climate changes anticipated in the next 10-20 years could affect landscape practices and materials which MELA could then be instrumental in using to put focus on and help create the practice, material and product changes it sees as necessary to sustainability.

Membership in CSBA provides access to knowledgeable people from other industries that have been studying and practicing sustainability for years. MELA could draw on their knowledge in order to shorten our ramp up to moving forward on various sustainability initiatives. With a mostly volunteer organization, the time needed to keep up with all the information, trends and products out there can be daunting. Membership in and association with many of these groups could be very helpful to MELA.

- 5) *What are other companies doing in relationship to the environment?* Some firms are creating organic foods for the consumer and children's school lunches that are locally grown and contained in green packaging. Another firm is creating children's clothing using renewable products, practices and utilizing women re-entering the work force after serving time in prison. Others are changing their practices, such as The Shedd, which has worked on its water consumption and waste. Green Depot is developing and manufacturing the green building products because green products are not always available. Another firm is changing the cleaning industry by developing its own green products.
- 6) *What are the perceived drawbacks to sustainable business?* "Green-fatigue" and "green-washing" were the two main drawbacks discussed at the conference. The first, is weariness by the consumer about things "green" that threaten to weaken the movement. In addition, green-fatigue has resulted in some viewing it as just a "fad".

"Green-washing" is the problem whereby companies claim their products are green when they really aren't. This got the group into the issue of certification and levels of certification – why do it and who?

The following points were discussed:

- Need to police those businesses that claim “green” so claims are valid. Otherwise, it dilutes the movement and change.
- What is the primary objective of certification? It is a point of reference for the consumer when looking to qualify a product or service.
- What are the pieces of certification? Certification can mean different things for different industries.
- Certification must be done by a 3rd party for there to be credibility. There are organizations that do various forms of certifying “sustainable”, but it was made clear in the conference discussion that not all have meaning. More follow up is needed.
- It needs to be on-going. You can’t just become certified “green” initially and be able to maintain that designation forever.

Although it was mentioned at the conference that Underwriters Laboratories is currently undertaking some initiatives to certify environmental products or practices, follow up on this matter revealed that their focus is on Europe and still in a state of flux. ILCA only certifies for Certified Landscape Professionals and Certified Landscape Technicians. It could be beneficial to MELA’s place in the sustainability arena to become the certifying body for the industry’s “green” practices in addition to having developed the guidelines. For example, MELA’s conferences could provide CEUs that would be required for continued LEED certification by landscape designers, landscape architects, etc.

7) What was the conference like and is it significant for MELA to participate?

While attending the conference, it became evident how big an issue sustainability is. Membership in this conference, this organization, and networking with others becomes the means for MELA to get their arms around new trends, products and initiatives. MELA’s participation becomes a good means for exchanging ideas and a platform for gaining credibility for advancing sustainable landscaping initiatives.

CONCLUSION: The conference was very informative and the time is ripe for MELA to move to the forefront with its message of sustainable practices for the landscape industry and be a vital player. First, follow up with several of the individuals or organizations that participated in the conference be made. MELA could engage in conversations with: 1) Peter Nicholson of Foresight Design Initiatives to obtain some added guidance on how they became one of the recognized organizations for sustainability, 2) Laura Flannigan of Five Winds International, to discuss possible sources of funding for building MELAs organization and 3) a member of the Chicago Climate Task Force to determine how MELA might leverage their actions in order to build on our own mission objectives.

Second, continue its mission to educate its members by: 1) researching and contacting those in the industry already incorporating green practices so we can encourage more of the same – McAdam, Pizzo, etc. 2) Consider the following as possible topics for its ILCA Mid-Am program:

- Key Note: Sustainability – What is it and why do it? Have a speaker, maybe outside of the landscape industry, that could talk about the movement in general, and inform the audience on current initiatives so all are on the same page.
- Session 2: Current Products/Practices – this might be several speakers (landscape architects, manufacturers (e.g., Stihl), lawn applicators, etc.).
- Session 3: Panel Discussion – Where do we need to focus our efforts to build credibility, value and impact for the landscape industry? Next 1, 3 and 5 years.
- Session 4: Panel Discussion – What will the future look like for the landscape industry in the next 10-20 years.

Finally, MELA's mission to pursue goals through education, advocacy and networking, puts it in the position to be in the right place and time as THE organization for the long-term future of a sustainable landscape industry.

MELA began its journey as an educational entity; to bring programs to and to educate others on sustainable practices. To continue that journey as a key advocate for sustainability, MELA is uniquely positioned to continue its move from a mostly volunteer organization to one with defined departments and staff supported by a volunteer structure. This growth trajectory would allow MELA to grow its membership by creating value through advocacy and education. It could make MELA an important voice, among others, to represent the industry with legislators and product manufacturers. MELA could become the source for best practices by developing the LEEDs certification guidelines and certifying on an on-going basis those that seek to maintain their LEEDs certification.