

THE PLAIN DEALER

Sustainability Summit sparks commitment from leaders to promote a new way of life

Leaders from businesses big and small to help promote new way of life

Tuesday, August 18, 2009

John Funk

Plain Dealer Reporter

When Taylor Companies President and Chief Executive Jeffrey Baldassari looks at the huge piles of sawdust, wood scraps and leather at his Bedford furniture factory, he sees dollars - dollars coming back rather than going out in landfill fees.

Baldassari has turned his waste products - 38 tons of sawdust, 15 tons of wood scraps and three tons of leather scraps - into revenue, slashing his landfill fees from \$20,000 per year to about \$800.

And he has cut his energy and water bills by 59 percent through a series of retrofits and new technology.

Altogether, he figures he conserves about \$80,000 worth of natural resources annually.

Baldassari is no skinflint. He's a convert to sustainability - and the culture of sustainability that is not just "green" but a way of life.

Baldassari was one of a number of local executives who told their success stories at a summit last week, Sustainable Cleveland 2019.

From regional companies such as Taylor to global giants like Wal-Mart, sustainability as a business practice has become gospel. Now they will try to spread the message across Northeast Ohio.

Industry, not government, must lead the movement, business leaders said, because only industry is big enough to make the changes involved.

"It's not just about solar panels. It's about fundamental decision-making that represents a new way of doing business," said Jon Ratner, vice president of sustainability for Forest City

Enterprises. "This is about doing well by doing good."

The summit, hosted by Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, attracted about 700 people and included about 240 businesspeople.

The region's major institutions, such as the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, University Hospitals and Case Western Reserve University, the Gund and Cleveland foundations and the Cleveland Indians, also sent people. Mixed in were high school and college students.

For three days the crowd labored under the direction of CWRU Weatherhead School of Management professor David Cooperrider.

They listened to about a dozen speakers and broke into work groups to come up with a game plan to use sustainability as an economic driver in Northeast Ohio.

Jackson's staff and Weatherhead staff are working this week to record and organize the summit's major recommendations - along with the literally thousands of suggestions the participants came up with in daylong brainstorming. All of it was written initially on sticky notes and then boiled to recommendations. Even the sticky notes have been saved, said Jackson's communications chief, Maureen Harper.

Tom Morley, founder of Berea-based oil change company Lube Stop, also addressed the crowd.

Morley is a strong advocate for sustainability as a way of life. He said his company a few months ago introduced recycled oil - engine oil that has been re-refined after at least one stint in someone else's engine. The result?

Nearly half (47 percent) of Lube Stop customers choose the recycled product even though it costs a few dollars more. That alone has convinced Morley he is in step with the public.

Patrick Shanks, regional marketing director of Greater Cleveland Wal-Mart stores, also participated in the summit. In an interview on the floor of the busy convention, Shanks said that since February his 10 stores from Brooklyn to Ashtabula have donated tens of thousands of pounds of fresh foods to the Cleveland Foodbank rather than see them go to landfills as they did in the past when their expiration dates approached.

For the world's largest retailer, that is just a toe in the water of sustainability.

The company has in fact embraced sustainability as a shift in the way it does business, Shanks said. Wal-Mart is now working with its 65,000 suppliers to adopt the same culture change.

Global giant Parker Hannifin, headquartered here, also sent people to the summit - along with a hybrid truck that it parked on Lakeside Avenue.

Rick Taylor, a Parker vice president, said the drive across the corporate world for sustainability has proven a business opportunity.

"Our corporate headquarters are here, but most of our manufacturing is not," said Taylor. "But

it's so important to us that Cleveland succeed. We are members of the community."

Parker Hannifin is ready to help with the next step: moving sustainability into the region's culture. "We will support the effort and we will provide the brainpower," he said.

The company for years has worked outside media attention with the Corporate Sustainability Network to help local businesses get a idea of what is at stake.

Network co-founder attorney David Nash said the reviews under way this week at City Hall and Weatherhead are crucial to something concrete coming out of the summit.

Something concrete such as putting wind turbines in Lake Erie - a project that will need the "sense of community" that summit participants experienced firsthand.

"We have to digest all that information methodically and thoughtfully," he said. "This kind of digestion is going to be strategic. And it will actually accelerate the transition."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jfunk@plaind.com, 216-999-4138

©2009 Plain Dealer

© 2009 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.