

## Green advisers: Waste Reduction Partners helps Asheville-area organizations save money in environmentally friendly ways

By Jason Sandford • September 12, 2010

**A** program aimed at helping local businesses, governments and schools save money in ways that are environmentally friendly was green before green was cool.

Waste Reduction Partners is a program of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, a multicounty local government planning and development organization.

The program, started in 1992, taps into the volunteer expertise of retired scientists, engineers and others to develop cost-savings plans that also benefit the environment.

In 2000, the program teamed with the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources for management assistance. And in 2008, the program expanded to serve the entire state by opening a second office in Research Triangle Park under the auspices of the Triangle J Council of Governments.

"It's something we've been doing a long time," said Terry Albrecht, the state director of Waste Reduction Partners who works in the Land-of-Sky offices on Leicester Highway.

"It wasn't called lowering your carbon footprint in 1995, but that's what we're doing," Albrecht said. "It's just been very grounded in a business sense."

Over the years, the program has helped businesses, schools and local governments save hundreds of thousands of dollars in water and electricity charges, and in turn saved water and cut air pollution. It's now in high demand with renewed interest in protecting the environment, and because of federal spending and grant programs aimed at promoting savings through sustainability measures such as energy audits.

### Useful advice

The program got its start with the help of preliminary funding from the Tennessee Valley Authority, which wanted to put retired engineers and scientists to work with industries in the region to develop pollution prevention strategies and cut costs, Albrecht said.

Today, the program has about a \$450,000 budget and receives money from federal, state and local sources, mainly grants. Waste Reduction Partners offers its services at no charge to its clients, who can see big cost savings or may land grants after receiving a report from the program. "Our group, over the past year and a half, has been able to assist 41 organizations — community colleges, schools, local governments — and help them receive \$4.6 million in grant money," Albrecht said.

Last year, the program worked with 250 clients, he said, who implemented Waste Reduction Partners' plans 52 percent of the time. That's an implementation rate the program is proud of, Albrecht said. "Our program is unique because it provides one-on-one technical assistance with knowledgeable staff that can really help explain opportunities. That's a level of assistance you don't gain at looking at a website or a fact sheet."

The program's volunteers recently assisted with a high-profile project to help Asheville City Schools save money. The Waste Reduction Partners team's

energy audit found more than 60 low- or no-cost projects that could save the school system more than \$65,000 and save more than 880,000 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions. The audit recommendations meshed well with schools system's on-going project of replacing about 300 windows, the installation of energy efficient lighting and a new heating and cooling system at Asheville High School, a 91-year-old building.

"We were able to develop reports and recommendations to help them save a little over 20 percent in energy costs," Albrecht said. The system was also able to acquire a \$200,000 state energy office grant, and received matching funds through a Progress Energy program.

"That's been an exciting project, and coming out of that, we helped them come up with a mission statement and a steering committee" to make even more changes, he said.

## Personalized help

Many private consultants usually work exclusively with big clients, Albrecht said. But Waste Reduction Partners can work with just about type of client, although it doesn't offer services to residential customers.

If a small business calls, for example, a team or one or two engineers or other volunteers with relevant experience will arrive, walk through and do an analysis. The team will then make recommendations.

"It might be a half-day or a full day on site," Albrecht said. "Then we would provide a report back and outline savings to implement environmental benefits. We might help a business benchmark energy use or water use against other, similar organizations. And we might make recommendations for a good application of renewable energy sources."

Volunteers for Waste Reduction Partners say it's all in a day's work.

Elaine Marten, a retired organic chemist, said she began volunteering for the program about 13 years ago. One satisfying project she took on was working with Progress Energy and Duke Energy on converting coal ash remains into new products.

Coal ash, the waste product of coal-burning power plants, is under extra scrutiny after the Environmental Protection Agency in May said it is considering tougher regulations on its handling.

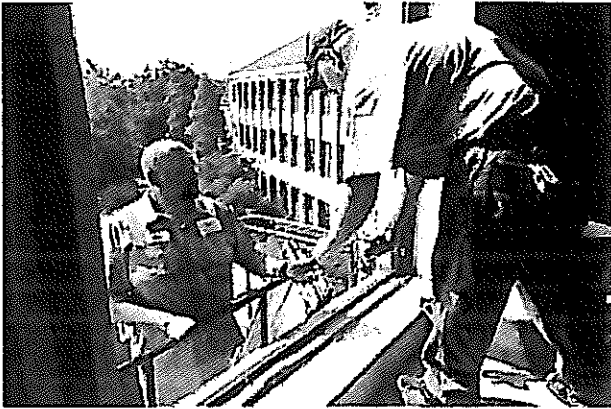
Marten said her team succeeded in devising a way to remove a component of coal ash known as aluminosilicates and reusing those minerals in ready-mix concrete and engineering cement. The project used 20 tons of coal ash from Progress Energy's waste pond.

"The project was very successful. It hasn't been commercialized yet," but technical publications wrote about the project, and Marten's team has presented its findings at conferences.

Ron Miller, a former chemist who most recently worked as a computer consultant, said he joined the group in January 2009 after seeing a newspaper notice asking for volunteers. Miller, who also worked in the construction business for several years, said he worked on an energy audit for an emergency shelter and cut its bills by 20 percent.

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Mike Sharp and Jacob Seagraves of Blue Ridge Glass worked on a project to replace all 300 of the windows at Asheville High School this summer as part of a comprehensive set of energy efficiency improvements done with the help of Waste Reduction Partners, a program based at the Land of Sky Regional Council that helps local schools, governments and businesses find ways to save money through efficiencies that are environmentally friendly. (Erin Brethauer/ebrethau@citizen-times.com)

## By the numbers:

Since 2000, Waste Reduction Partners has provided more than 158,000 hours of technical expertise to businesses, manufacturers, and institutions. That's resulted in:

- \$23 million in total utility cost savings.
- 210,200 in megawatt hours saved.
- 125,100 tons of greenhouse gas reduction.
- 197,600 tons of solid waste reduced.
- 717,300 million BTUs reduced.
- 601 million gallons water conserved.

SOURCE: Waste Reduction Partners