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Greening New York, One Tattoo Parlor at a Time

By Sarah Wessler

For over two decades, the Lower East Side Ecology Center has been a fixture of New York's environmental movement, providing outreach and education on topics such as composting, electronics recycling and urban gardening to local residents, community centers and school groups. With new program EcoBizNYC, the center is reaching out for the first time to an important constituency: small business.

In the last few years, there has been growing recognition across the green building movement that small businesses represent a unique challenge. While major corporations such as Wal-Mart and Bank of America have embraced green building as a PR tool, many small business owners lack the resources to hire consultants or upgrade equipment. And while an inefficient air conditioning system at one dentist's office may seem inconsequential, multiply the phenomenon by millions of similar spaces and the contours of the issue begin to reveal themselves. In terms of energy use alone, according to the Center for Small Business and the Environment, the United States' 27 million small businesses consume half of all resources used for commercial and industrial purposes. "Because we know small business constitutes half of the economy, and we know it wastes much of the energy that it buys," said the Center's executive director, Byron Kennard, in testimony before a congressional panel last year, "we argue that small business probably represents the largest untapped reservoir of potential for energy efficiency."

EcoBizNYC is addressing these issues on the local level. The free program (funded by Con Edison and Community Board 3) provides small business owners with a sustainability audit, NYSERDA energy audit, various levels of green certification (modeled after the LEED rating system), workshops led by local sustainability experts, and other tools to help them go green. After developing the concept, the Lower East Side Ecology Center's Tara DePorte and her team went door to door in the East Village to gauge interest. "The initial canvas asked, are you interested in sustainability, recycling, energy efficiency? Then, are you interested in incentive programs that could help you cut costs on energy, water?" Hundreds of storefronts later, the group was satisfied of strong demand across the board. "A lot of tattoo parlors were like, yeah, sign us up right now, we're totally ready to do this," says DePorte. "The stereotypes don't necessarily fit. It's not just the obviously green-messaging companies."

Around the country, a number of similar programs have been developed in recent years. The nonprofit Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, or BALLE, works with a network of local affiliates throughout the US and Canada to build strong local economies

centered around environmentally friendly, socially responsible small businesses. Like EcoBizNYC, BALLE's scope extends beyond green building to a broad range of related issues, from transportation to supply chain. However, according to program director Mary Rick, green building has recently started to emerge as a major area of activity. Local food and independent retail have dominated member groups' agendas since the organization's 2001 founding, says Rick, and "green building is a step behind those two. But it's coming with the greater understanding about our economic system and its linkage to climate change right now, and the opportunities for job creation in sustainable building, and cost savings."

One highly successful small business initiative, California's public-sector Bay Area Green Business Program, has granted green business certification to 1700 San Francisco-area companies since 1996. Around the time of its founding, the state and local government was actively strengthening environmental legislation, and many public agencies were beginning to push for environmental protection beyond legal compliance, developing training programs, materials and technologies to help Californians go green. When the regional council of governments' hazardous waste management committee determined that local auto repair shops were causing significant damage to the environment, it seemed logical to put these tools into action as part of a comprehensive outreach program geared to these businesses. The success of this initiative led to others targeting industries from printing to wine.

Years later, the vast majority of businesses that have signed on remain members, and demand continues to grow; 400 new businesses were certified last year alone. "We have everything through very tiny cafes and auto repair shops to very famous restaurants and major law firms," says Ceil Scandone, the program's regional coordinator. The program has spread beyond San Francisco; Hawaii has started a similar green certification process for hotels, Los Angeles and other California cities are following close behind with their own comprehensive initiatives, and New York's own Westchester County recently contacted the organization to learn more about its experience. Scandone credits much of this success to a combination of the Bay Area's green-friendly citizenry and proactive state and local government support. "It's one to ask businesses to do something like buying paper or buying EP computers. They can buy that at the store," she says. "But if it's something like recycling, if that's not being provided by the public agency, what are they going to do, take it home?"

Michael Bobker, Senior Fellow at the CUNY Institute for Urban Systems and director of the university's Building Performance Lab agrees that political support is key. Greening the built environment will require significant advances on a number of fronts, he says, from technology, education, workforce development and beyond, and the private sector may not be able to produce the needed changes quickly enough to make a difference. In the case of technology, for example, "You need technological change, and you can't have it without investment. And you really need the proper political programs to help the investment environment. Even when times were good, so to speak, you need incentives in the market, because a lot of this is buried out in public goods. Society wants these things to happen, but not all of the benefits accrue to the individual making the investment."

Asked who was doing the most interesting work in the field, Bobker replies, "I think the most exciting work is being done actually in the White House. We're getting some leadership that we have not had, and I think it's really important."