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By Peter Passi
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Practicality, problem-solving rule Twin Ports sustainability group's efforts

An initiative to improve the sustainability of local businesses and institutions turns one year old this week, and it's already celebrating some success stories.

By: **Peter Passi**, Duluth News Tribune

LED light bulb



Duluth Grill general manager Jeff Petcoff holds a LED light bulb that the restaurant is using to cut energy usage. Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com



Duluth Grill employee Mario Smirl empties compostable items into a bin for collection. The restaurant composts food scraps and certain kinds of waste, including special plastic containers used for portioning food. Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com

An initiative to improve the sustainability of local businesses and institutions turns one year old this week, and it's already celebrating some success stories.

Scott Davis, co-owner of Glenwood Signs & Awards, has cut his garbage output in half since joining the program.

Tom Hanson, co-owner of Embers Duluth Grill, replaced ketchup bottles with refillable containers — a simple shift that eliminated his past practice of sending 3,300 empty bottles to the dump each year. Plus, buying ketchup in bulk quantities should save him money.

Hanson and Davis are part of a group of 13 “early adopters” participating in a program called Sustainable Twin Ports.

While the 13 early adopters enrolled in Sustainable Twin Ports come from diverse backgrounds, project coordinator Tracy Meisterheim said: “We discovered our members had more in common than they realized. They all have employees, they use energy and they purchase things. We found there were more similarities than differences.”

“To a huge extent, they’re learning from one another,” Meisterheim said. “One of the most powerful parts of the training has been when we put our chairs in a circle and have conversations.”

Nikki Anderson, general manager of the Inn on Lake Superior, another early adopter, said her hotel has been working to reduce its use of chemicals and found a valuable ally in Frank Andrews, a custodial supervisor for the University of Wisconsin-Superior, also partner in Sustainable Twin Ports. Andrews introduced the hotel to some of the better earth-friendly replacement products he had found, including an ionizer used to charge water and turn it into a powerful but safe cleaner.

“We’ve learned a lot from Frank, and now we don’t need to reinvent the wheel,” Anderson said.

The Inn on Lake Superior also has invested in an ozone machine that has allowed the hotel to cut down on its use of laundry detergent, bleach and other chemicals. Anderson said laundry treated with ozone also dries about 40 percent faster than loads laundered using the previous system, reducing the hotel’s energy bills and lengthening the useful life of its towels and linens.

Tammy Hippchen, a business development specialist for Twin Ports Testing, another early adopter, said Sustainable Twin Ports is rooted in practicality and problem-solving.

“I don’t think it’s a do-gooder program at all,” she said. “Going ‘green’ is a fad. This isn’t a fad. Sustainability is about looking at what you’re doing, why you’re doing it and how you could do it better.”

Largely because of its involvement with Sustainable Twin Ports, Hippchen said the Superior-based firm is looking into installing a biomass-fueled furnace and power generator.

Meisterheim said her program pushes early adopters to consider new solutions, such as biomass technology.

“We encourage people to envision where they want to be and create a path to get there, instead of being a slave to what has always been before.”

At Glenwood Signs & Awards, Davis has accepted that change will need to come incrementally. He has been working to promote products made from renewable and recyclable materials, but sometimes these carry higher costs.

Since getting involved in Sustainable Twin Ports, Davis established a relationship with a supplier of plaques made from wood harvested in Minnesota, and he’s working to develop more products that make use of renewable resources nearby.

“A big part of our job is to educate our customer base,” he said. “What we do is all customer-driven, and we need to change customer thinking so we can change direction.”

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If you go: Sustainable Twin Ports event

What: Sustainable Twin Ports’ Early Adopter project showcase

Where: Greysolon Ballroom, 231 E. Superior St., Duluth

When: 4-7 p.m. Thursday

Program: Early Adopters presenting sustainability displays from 4-5:30 p.m.; Bob Willard, former IBM executive and sustainability advocate, will speak from 5:30-6:45 p.m.; at 6:45 p.m. Sustainable Twin Ports will unveil additional training opportunities.

Who: Anyone is welcome

Cost: Free