



**Metropolitan Exposition Recreation Commission (MERC)
for
Oregon Convention Center, Portland Center for the Performing Arts and Portland
Expo Center**

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1. Overview

The Metropolitan Exposition Recreation Commission (MERC) operates diverse and popular public venues in Portland, Oregon. The Oregon Convention Center draws national and local conventions, corporate meetings and retreats, and special catered events; the Portland Center for the Performing Arts is comprised of four theatres and one hall (Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Keller Auditorium, Dolores Winningstad Theatre, Newmark Theatre and Brunish Hall) and host to national Broadway tours and local resident performing companies including the Oregon Ballet Theatre, Oregon Symphony, Portland Opera, and Portland Arts and Lectures Series; and the Portland Expo Center is as the largest consumer trade show facility on the West Coast.

MERC is a service of Metro, the regional governing body, which, in addition to the operation and maintenance of the MERC venues, serves as the long-term planning authority and regulator of solid waste collection and reduction policies. Metro has been on the forefront of the sustainability movement for decades, from implementing green business practices to educating residents to adopt earth-friendly habits to securing green spaces for parks and controlling growth among its urban areas.

2. Program Establishment

The MERC venues are cherished community assets and reflect the interests and priorities of the region's residents, specifically, environmental stewardship. The decision

to establish sustainability programs in each of the venues was made to meet the demands of the local community and business needs of the clients and started with the expansion of the Oregon Convention Center (OCC) in 2003. MERC's sustainability initiative was based upon similar goals established by its parent organization, Metro, as well as the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) guidelines, and is supported by other local governments such as the City of Portland's Office of Sustainable Development.

As a component of the expansion construction project, the OCC became the first in the nation to achieve Leadership for Environmental Excellence in Design (LEED) certification as an existing building (EB) by the USGBC. Areas of focus included recycling, energy consumption and water usage and, in addition, the OCC incorporated sustainable operations practices such as utilizing environmentally-friendly cleaning products as well as creating a rain garden to filter and cool the extensive storm water that runs off the large roof and site surface area. By including native plants and efficient irrigation technology as well as designing high-performance indoor mechanical systems to capitalize the use of natural light and adopting an aggressive construction waste management plan, the OCC established itself as a leader among convention centers in practicing sustainability.

In 2008, the OCC was recertified and elevated to LEED-EB Silver, another first for convention centers across the U.S. Within the time period between LEED certificates, the Portland Center for Performing Arts and Portland Expo Center also adopted aggressive sustainable business practices such as using energy efficient lights and earth-friendly cleaning products, increasing recycling rates and investing in energy efficient chillers, boilers and other mechanical systems. Over the past five years, the MERC venues have consistently increased their commitment to operating sustainably in the following ways:

- Improving recycling programs and establishing baselines and goals for diversion of waste – both consumer waste and event-related waste (i.e., pallets, boxes)
- Creating composting programs for food and beverage waste
- Utilizing compostable food and beverage plates, cups and utensils
- Promoting the use of recycling stations for customers' ease
- Installing low-flow plumbing systems, automatic bathroom fixtures and paperless hand dryers

Within each venue a "green" team of resident experts focus researching and implementing earth-friendly practices and an organization-wide MERC green team will soon be established to enhance coordination and efficiencies among the venues. Recently, the OCC hired a Sustainability Coordinator to lead its environmental efforts, including tracking and collecting the data required by the USGBC to reapply for LEED Silver recertification in 2013.

3. Goals and Benchmarking

The goals of MERC's sustainability program are to operate as environmentally-friendly as possible in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. Significant investments have been made in the venues' infrastructure to enhance energy efficiency and reduce costs. Each year, as venue budgets are planned, sustainability goals are identified and included in strategic plans. The effort to achieve LEED certification and recertification has guided much of the planning and goal setting to date. In recent years specific objectives (i.e., increase in diversion or recycling rates) are included in annual operating budgets.

MERC is fortunate to receive the support necessary to implement sustainable practices. The venues are located within the City of Portland, home to some of the greenest values in the country and known for its visionary urban planning, high usage of public transit, and love of bicycles. The environmental strides MERC venues have made have been embraced by local political and business leaders alike.

The public venue industry has only recently awakened to the sustainability movement, however, and many convention centers, arenas and performing arts centers have looked to the MERC venues for direction and guidance. For example, the industry trade association, International Association of Assembly Managers (IAAM) established a Sustainability Committee this year after its new President, Robyn Williams, Director of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts, was sworn into office. That committee looks to the expertise of MERC's Operations Directors and others in identifying industry-wide goals and educational efforts. In addition, the meeting and convention trade association magazine, Venues Today, recognized Jeff Blosser, Executive Director of the Oregon Convention Center, as a 2008 Hall of Headlines Award winner for his leadership in greening the convention industry.

In public relations terms, MERC's green accomplishments, such as diverting two-thirds the amount of left-over items from a popular annual rummage sale at the Portland Expo from the local landfill, is an easy story to tell to an interested and engaged public, both locally and nationally. Some of the interest in this issue is due to the sign of the times – high gas prices, a faltering economy – and the public's need to learn how to save resources, but much of it can be attributed to the elevation of the nation's environmental consciousness. It is now not only a "good thing to do" to operate in an environmentally friendly way, it is accepted as the "right" thing to do for the future of generations to come.

Complementing the nation's heightened awareness is the consumer's demand to convene in an environmentally-friendly way. The green meeting and convention business has gained in popularity and MERC's venues – particularly the Oregon Convention Center – are well-positioned to respond.

4. Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

The results of the sustainability efforts to date have, no doubt, resulted in a positive impact for the environment. In addition to the efforts previously mentioned, the venues have made significant investments to achieve Salmon-Safe Certification, purchase renewable energy, explore alternative forms of energy, and, perhaps, most importantly, change the way the employees, community and visitors think about the environment. Attached is a sustainability fact sheet pertinent to the OCC.

5. Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

Visitors to MERC's venues are encouraged to participate in the established environmentally-friendly practices. For example, all venues are conveniently located along the light rail transit system and travelers can completely avoid driving by taking transit from the airport to the Oregon Convention Center on the central eastside, the Portland Expo Center in North Portland or to the theatres within the Portland Center for Performing Arts in the city's downtown core. Conferees can visit Sustainability Stations to take full advantage of the facility's recycling and composting practices and meeting planners can purchase an event package that tracks and reports the diversion, recycling and composting rates of a specific day.

The MERC venues are unique in that they are publicly-owned venues in a community that fully embraces sustainability. Near the OCC, a hotel offers a carbon offset program to mitigate the environmental impacts of air travel. Local restaurants support nearby farms to serve organic, naturally homegrown cuisine paired with award-winning Oregon wines and microbrews. Pedestrian and bike paths link neighborhoods and districts and visitors can enjoy the breathtaking natural attractions such as Mt. Hood, the Oregon Coast or the Columbia River Gorge with ease and minimal cost.

6. Real-World Example

Conferences and conventions generate vast amounts of paper, promotional items, name tags, food and beverage containers and signage. The Oregon Convention Center recycles and reuses all "back-of-house" items utilized during an event: wood pallets, delivery boxes, signs, lights, tablecloths, napkins, and food. (Left-over food is donated to a local domestic violence shelter.) Event attendees are encouraged to recycle paper, glass bottles and cans in bins set up in the "front-of-house." The OCC created Sustainability Stations staffed by individuals who inform visitors where and how to recycle or compost any item they come into contact with: name tags, paper plates, or eating utensils. Without these stations, many visitors simply throw away these items but when they are strategically placed throughout the OCC, employees see the results in increased diversion rates.

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