

Denver's Greenprint Action Plan Grows Roots

Published on www.fivewinds.com by Paulette Fréchette on July 21, 2009

Environmental Management System Maps the Course

The City of Denver has long been a leader in the pursuit of environmental sustainability. The recent ISO 14001 certification of six city departments is yet another achievement along its declared path to green living and is the result of rigorous adherence to the city's Greenprint Action Plan and Environmental Management Systems (EMS) initiative. The City intends to have all departments ISO certified by 2011 by following a clearly charted implementation plan. The ISO 14001 standard is an internationally recognized way for organizations to formalize sustainability policies, measure progress, and make third-party verified claims about progress.

Five Winds International has worked with the City of Denver since 2005 as part of Greenprint Denver's conceptual design team and has continued to provide integral guidance in the development of the city's EMS. "The initial certification marks a significant milestone, but our work continues. With on-going assistance from Five Winds International, remaining city departments will be certified over the next few years," said Deby Stabler, Consultant with Five Winds. In 2009, nine more groups will seek certification and the remaining departments will follow in 2010. Denver will be one of the first cities in the U.S. to use a fully functioning, city-wide certified EMS to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability.

Strengthen the Solution

What started as a water quality study to address problems in the South Platte River from a maintenance garage resulted in a logical extension to address greater interconnected environmental issues. The City realized that an end-of-pipe solution would be very short-lived, and may in fact have negative impact in other areas.

An EMS offered the option of a more complete system to deal with environmental issues, now and in the future, because it gives the City a strong and recognized framework within which to work towards its environmental sustainability goals.

Cultivate a Network of Advocates

The EMS process has had many peripheral benefits for Denver. City-wide information gathering to understand the complexities of becoming a green city has required involvement and buy-in at all levels. This is not always a straightforward exercise, but City employees have become some of the biggest proponents of the initiative's success. "Five Winds works with each group and each person to achieve a truly workable solution," said Stabler. "Regular core team meetings are held where inputs are turned into realities."

In some cases, issues thought to be unique to a particular group were found to have common ground. For example, the Solid Waste Division of Public Works needed to address composting alternatives — so too did The Denver Zoo. Using targeted communications strategies, the City identified common needs that addressed the two diverse departments while fully acknowledging each group's unique mandates.

The EMS process identified environmental issues and put appropriate operational solutions in place. The City and its employees have always been encouraged to take a proactive approach to solving current or possible issues, but the EMS

now provides the structure to do so. It further welcomes the support and involvement of individuals which, according to Stabler, "goes a long way to establishing the longevity of greening."

Acknowledge Success

Another significant benefit for The City of Denver is better ways to measure environmental progress and quantify its successes. In 2008 alone, Denver "greened" its fleet by retrofitting vehicle emissions control systems and changing to alternative fuel that burns cleaner than gasoline. Fuel delivery and fleet shop maintenance standards and methods were improved. Notably, the City reduced water usage by changing the turf grass to a kind that requires substantially less watering.

In an era when the term "greenwashing" was coined, some longstanding issues have also been resolved. Declaring an achievement carries significantly more weight when substantiated with facts. And, when facts are substantiated by third-party verification, as is the case with ISO certification, the effort gains even greater credibility on a broader public platform.

Owning the Future

Put very simply, the City of Denver is walking the talk. From its beginnings as Greenprint to what it will become, the City of Denver has taken ownership of its journey to sustainability. Its on-going resolve to work towards ISO 14001 certification confirms, on an international stage, the City's long held commitment to meet the needs of today in an environmentally responsible way, while planning for reduced environmental burden in the future. Value without burden. Five Winds International salutes The City of Denver.