

It's Easy Being Green at the EC

Fun and interactive opps at Sustainability Village ♦ BY NICOLE FANCHER

For those of you who have still never been to the Eugene Celebration — despite having lived here for years — this article is for you. Whatever your reasons for passing it by, there is one very green reason the 25th Celebration is one you simply cannot miss.

On Sept. 8 and 9, a couple dozen eco-businesses and non-profits will take over the Olive Street block between Broadway and 8th Avenue to create the Celebration's first Sustainability Village. But this is not your average info-booth-lined, petition-signing environmental fair, says Celebration booking and promotions director and the Village's main organizer, Cindy Ingram. "It's going to be super interactive."

Each of the Sustainability Village exhibitors will incorporate a hands-on element to engage visitors and educate them about sustainable living. Celebration-goers can get crafty with BRING Recycling's recycled art mosaic, then build a solar stove with the folks from Aprovecho. Other exhibitors include the creators of UO's photovoltaic-façaded Lillis Business Complex — which received the LEED "silver" award for being the greenest business school in the nation — and several local sustainable food businesses such as Nancy's Yogurt, Toby's and Golden Temple. Free samples are probable. Mmmmm.

Ingram says the Sustainability Village is a chance for local residents to learn about sustainable businesses and eco-friendly consumer options in their own community. But in planning the event, she wasn't exactly sure where to start.

"I'm not an expert in sustainability," she says, "but I know how to gather people." She turned to the right woman to jumpstart her quest: Felicity Fahy, Eugene's first sustainability manager. With a 20-year background in sustainability policy and planning, Fahy began a dialogue to develop a "comprehensive understanding of sustainability." Fahy says issues of social equity and environmental health are critical elements of sustainability that are often overlooked.

The City of Eugene's tent at the fair will host several presentations on topics ranging from bike safety (including bicycle repairs) to composting, sustainable landscaping, stormwater education, rental housing, green building and transportation — the most important issue in Eugene right now, according to Fahy. Also, on Saturday at 1 pm, Mayor Kitty Piercy will award this month's Bold Step award to a local business that is making strides towards sustainability.

Who that winning biz might be is anyone's guess, but according to Ingram and Fahy, there are local eco-business newbies popping up all the time.

One such green start-up is OsoEco, which Ingram calls



one of "the new stars in sustainability." OsoEco aims to revolutionize the way citizens obtain access to eco-information by creating "the most trusted eco-community portal."

Founders Caroline Cummings and Katie Wilson-Hamaker, disenchanted with their work in the profit-based corporate world, became business partners after meeting at a sustainability workshop in Portland. The women realized there was a problem with the eco-movement: While about 35 million Americans identified themselves as "environmentally conscious," they still had difficulty connecting with products, businesses and activities that reflected their values. "There is a lot of frustration around [the environmental] movement," Cummings says, due mostly to misinformation and disorganization that leave people discouraged in their quest to live sustainably. "People want solutions," Cummings says.

OsoEco aims to provide them. Currently a buzz website, OsoEco.com will be an online shopping and community interface for citizens and businesses to interact and exchange eco-friendly products and information. Similar to social networking websites like MySpace or Facebook, OsoEco will have "OsoMe" pages where users can personalize their eco-interests, join green groups, promote eco-businesses and products and get involved with local activism.

While these ambitious eco-chicas are busy setting the green bar high, they are no stodgy taskmasters. For them, horsing around is a key ingredient to healthy business. Their interactive exhibit at the Sustainability Village involves a dunk tank (where visitors take aim at "eco-hating Hecklers" who shout environmental blasphemies such as "I leave my lights on all night long!") and an eco-fortune teller. "Humor is such a great learning tool," says Cummings.

OsoEco will also invite Village visitors to vote for a non-profit to receive an Oso generous donation: For every vote received, OsoEco will give \$1 to the winning nonprofit (up

to \$500). There's Oso much more about these gals ... but you'll have to discover it at the Celebration.

Another exciting event at the Village is an interactive cob-building exhibit by Jack Stephens of the Eugene-based Natural Building Network (NBN). Cob is building material made from sand, mud and straw — the same materials used to make adobe. But unlike adobe, in which the mixture is poured into brick molds then dried for use, wet cob can be sculpted and molded into shape as one continuous structure. Niches, benches and tables can all be built right into these earthen homes. "It makes for a very safe, durable, strong, beautiful home," says Stephens, who founded NBN in 2005.

NBN promotes the growing Natural Building movement, a reintroduction of a way old practice. There are about 500,000 currently inhabited cob homes in Great Britain alone, some of which are 500 years old. There are millions more throughout Europe, especially in Germany and France, where there's been a huge resurgence in cob building.

Homes made from sand and straw and mud may seem a little flimsy next to modern building designs and housing codes. But Stephens says that just 80 years ago, "most of our great-grandparents lived in earthen homes." Materials manufacturers developed building codes so their products would be used in modern home building, says Stephens. But cob homes are perfectly safe, if not safer, and they don't add to the ten to 30 percent of toxic, building materials that make up our landfills. Cob is fireproof (unlike wood), insect proof (unlike wood) and even safe against earthquakes (unlike concrete). The only thing that can damage cob, Stephens says, is water. But not to fear, waterlogged Oregonians! Cob homes need only "a good hat and a good pair of boots" to stand against water, says Stephens, who uses asphalt shingles or metal roofing to cover cob.

Not only do cob homes age remarkably well, but they are also energy and space efficient. Natural building can also be a social equalizer: Cob homes have been built for as little as \$500, and cities like Portland are using natural building to address homelessness, bridging the seemingly oceanic gap between those who can and cannot buy a home. I'm already eyeing the giant mud pit in my alley.

Stephens will build a cob structure over the weekend. He's bringing the mud and sand and straw in buckets, and it's sure to be messy. But he invites visitors to have a hand at the creation, to touch the mud and ask questions while he works, for to his mind, natural building is a community-building activity as well. And in the end, when Stephens and his crew take sledgehammers to the temporary cob structure, they will return the natural materials to the earth.

So whether you decide to get down and dirty or simply stroll the green street, the Sustainability Village is surely something to celebrate. Bring the kids over from the adjacent KidZone, bring an appetite — and possibly a change of clothes — and prepare to learn how fun and easy sustainability can be. ♦

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