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Event planners see developing niche in green meetings

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When Birmingham's Catalyst organization needed a space for its recent board retreat, the young professionals group found a location that was more than they bargained for.

Instead of just getting a 1,000-square-foot facility to host their conference, the young professionals organization was able to have a learning experience at the **Green Resource Center** for Alabama, as well.

The center is one of several organizations and companies that is trying to encourage and capitalize on the green meeting movement.

As all types of businesses and organizations are looking to become more environmentally friendly, Mark Rubino, director of the Green Resource Center for Alabama, said his organization could become a destination for green meetings.

"We're a cross between a library and the **McWane Center**," Rubino said.

Rubino said the goal is for the resource center to be a place where individuals and organizations can explore and research green options, but to also serve as a workshop, luncheon or meeting site.

Birmingham's Dallas Teague Snider, national account director for Conference Direct, said the green meeting movement is catching on nationally. She said more organizations and companies are looking at ways to hold meetings without leaving a massive environmental footprint.

"The hospitality and meeting industry is huge, (so) even taking small steps to go green can make a difference," Snider said.

Loriann White, of the **Atlanta Green Meetings Council**, said one of the first things to consider when you decide to have a green meeting is how green you want to go and how will that decision impact your event and your organization.

"If folks really want to go green, they should figure out what they want to achieve as far as how it will affect their bottom line and if they're being socially responsible," she said.

The cost of having a green meeting, as opposed to a non-green meeting varies based on several factors including site, materials and food costs.

The difference in price really depends on how much you're willing to spend to go green, even though many green meeting practices, such as using electronic communications instead of paper can actually save money.

Other green options, such as finding a convenient, central location or organic food, might be more costly, so White said it also helps to build up to full-scale green meetings by not trying to convert everything at once.

"Do what you can by focusing on one or two initiatives everyone can agree on," she said.

From there, White said it's a good idea to put ideas in writing, then proceed with contacting prospective meeting locations or facilities, and seeing what green options and features they have.

Sometimes holding a meeting in a LEED-certified facility can help spark some green talk in an organization and even provide an educational opportunity.

Rubino said the individuals and groups coming to the Green Resource Center are able to learn a lot about green options, and how they can impact the bottom line. And that's true from the natural conservationists and tree huggers up to the skeptics.

In addition to facility features, White said transportation should be another major factor. That means it's a good idea to find a location where conference or meeting attendees can stay within walking distance of the event.

During the planning process, White also suggests discussing the different food options for the meeting. For a green meeting, cloth napkins and organic dishes are obvious choices, but there are other considerations, as well.

"I know of a planner who worked with a local caterer, but they'd ordered something out of season that had to be shipped from miles away," White said. "That's not good."

Because there are so many things to consider when creating a green meeting or conference, White said it makes sense to think small at first and build up.

"Don't expect to change things overnight," she said. "We tend to want immediate results, but it's best to think about what effect we can have on tomorrow."

Cindy Riley is a freelance writer based in Birmingham.

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