

## Column by AIPC President, Edgar Hirt

### *Getting Greener Together*



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**AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognizing excellence in centre management. It's global network of over 165 leading centres in 53 countries, combined with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals ensures a broad and diversified level of industry knowledge and expertise, while its wide variety of program activities supports members in developing and enhancing their skills in the areas of operations, finance, technology, staff development, marketing, client relations and sustainability.**

The fact that the drive toward sustainability was not deflected in any serious way by the recent global recession strongly suggests that it is a factor that is here to stay. Meetings and conventions will be affected by this, not simply because of the impacts of these events themselves but because they often involve long distance travel by delegates, which is itself a target for environmental advocates. And when sustainability concerns are combined with the lingering economic impacts left over from the recession, we get situations like those now being experienced in many areas – most notably the U.S. and UK – where cash-strapped governments are targeting reductions in meetings as a way of addressing both their financial and sustainability concerns.

In this kind of circumstance, it helps to be able to demonstrate that those most directly involved in staging major events like conventions and congresses – event organizers on the one hand and convention centres on the other – are doing everything they can to minimize those sustainability impacts that they can actually control. This is clearly an area where both groups need to work together – yet a recent survey of members of AIPC indicated that while over 85% of centres had developed policies and programs to support more sustainable meetings, only 5% said it had proven to be a "significant factor" in the client decision with a further 40% saying it was a "modest" decision factor. These are hardly numbers to inspire facility managers, yet centres continue to lead the way in developing "green" programming.

In one sense, it is reasonable that centres should be more aggressive in the greening of meetings, as they have a number of different pressures to respond to. Centres are most often owned by governments whose own policies encourage environmental sustainability. They are also accountable to their respective communities, who typically also want to see centres behave in a sustainable manner, and are subject to local and national building codes, many of which have very specific sustainability requirements, particularly for new buildings.

But the fact that centres have had to respond to these various audiences by creating better facilities and practices should be seen as an opportunity by planners and the organizations

they represent. It means that the raw materials for creating a more sustainable event program are readily at hand – and available from the host facility instead of requiring a lot of initiative by the organizers themselves.

Developing a zero-waste or energy efficient program can be a real challenge for organizers who are coming into a community without any real idea of what resources are available or what costs may be involved. But when the centre itself can supply the framework for a more sustainable program it relieves planners of a lot of work and uncertainty – making it much easier to do what most of their members would like to see them doing.

The cost factor – often a concern associated with creating a more sustainable program is changing too. With many sustainability initiatives now "imbedded" in the facilities and operating programs of convention centres, costs can be spread over a wider business base and can even help lower operating costs for the centre itself. The result is that "green" programs that might have been more costly even a few years ago are now becoming just a fact of life, particularly in newer facilities where the design has been configured to accommodate them more efficiently.

The bottom line is that things are changing in a way that makes it easier and more cost-effective than ever before to mount a sustainable event program – and many of the necessary resources are readily available through the host convention centre. It remains for centres and organizers to revisit the sustainability question together in the interest of having everyone pulling in the same direction – and showing why the meetings industry is one of the most responsible when it comes to managing environmental impacts.

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