

Garten drives sustainable business

Beth Casper, Special to the Statesman Journal 7:37 p.m. PST December 11, 2015



(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

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For Garten Services, sustainability is at its core.

The nonprofit sees its mission to create opportunities for people with disabilities as an essential part of the three prongs of sustainability: economic, environmental and social equity.

Garten provides jobs to 244 people with disabilities in recycling, commercial laundry, mail services, packaging and assembly, custodial services, and secure document destruction. Its daybreak program in Dallas and South Salem provides day activities and other enrichment activities to another 250 people with disabilities.

While Garten's mission supports sustainability's social and economic equity parts, its employees cover the last element of sustainability: environment.

Garten's work made it an easy match with the EarthWISE program — earning certification in 2008. The EarthWISE program is a free business environmental

assistance program of Marion County. EarthWISE staff helps businesses recycle, save energy, reduce waste and much more. To earn certification, a business meets criteria in six areas. Garten is one of more than 150 EarthWISE businesses and organizations in Marion County.

Every week, Garten employees recycle one million pounds of cardboard, paper and plastic (items found in the residential blue bins.) About 320,000 pounds of shredded paper gets recycled each month through the nonprofit's secure document destruction program. And 400,012 pounds of electronics — everything from computer monitors to cassette recorders — are recycled each month.

But, like any good environmentalist, Garten understands that reuse is a much more environmentally friendly practice than recycling. For electronics, a team of workers refurbishes computers to be sold in Garten's store or on eBay. For general recycling, workers are trained to notice still-good items and pull them off the conveyor belt. Workers have gleaned reams of paper, file folders, lunch trays, label makers and metal file cabinets.

The Garten Electronics and Reuse Store, 3334 Industrial Way NE in Salem, has been so successful that it is now open two days a week instead of one.



Garten's Amy Young disassembles a computer so that the parts may be recycled for other uses. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Its packaging and assembly business also has grown as other businesses understand the kind of help Garten employees can offer. Looptworks, a Portland company that makes consumer products from recycled materials, for example, contracted with Garten Services to take the leather off 44,000 Southwest Airlines airplane seats. Looptworks created duffel bags from the leather, which was too heavy for Southwest to keep on the airplanes.

These kinds of projects — as well as the massive recycling operation run by Garten — need space. Garten has facilities in Dallas, Eugene and South Salem but nothing as large as the 130,000 square-foot warehouse in North Salem.



Zach Cabbage shows off a discarded leather SouthWest Airlines passenger seat that was repurposed into all-leather duffel bags. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

It's in these buildings that Garten can — and has — made the biggest environmental impact.

Over the last five years, Garten has replaced lighting to use fewer fixtures and more efficient lighting. An addition in the recycling area provided an opportunity for Garten to continue to prove its green responsibility.

“We designed it so we could reuse old lighting fixtures with LED lighting,” said Gaelen McAllister, Garten’s Resource Development Manager. “We brought the light fixtures back to use from the 1970s. They used to have big fluorescent light bulbs in them but now we are using LEDs.”

At its Dallas laundry facility, old boilers leaked and inefficiently heated the water to the proper temperature. In 2013, Garten replaced the old boilers with tankless water heaters, which not only saved the nonprofit money on gas bills, but also meant that an employee didn’t have to come in during the dead of night to turn the boilers on. The tankless water

heaters not only bring the water to the appropriate temperature more efficiently but also heat the water on demand, so water is only heated if it is being used.

For all of the services Garten provides, a fleet of vehicles drive around the mid-Willamette Valley daily. Those vehicles run on recycled oil, hydraulic fluid, transmission fluid and radiator fluid.

But Garten has been able to make the biggest impact with its fleet by combining drop-offs and pick-ups. This is already being done with each service—all the commercial laundry in one region is picked up at the same time. Garten employees are looking to expand this feature by combining trips among services also. For example, there might be a day when Garten's mail services truck passes a business that uses Garten's commercial laundry service. If the mail truck picks up the laundry, it saves a trip for the laundry truck.

"There are 100 mail pick-ups a day all around the mid-Willamette Valley," said McAllister. "We are passing places that we do secure document destruction and laundry. We are looking at our routes to see if we can be even more efficient."



Nate Patton operates Garten's confidential document shredding. Garten offers document destruction either at their warehouse or at their customer's place of business. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Efficiency is the priority for Garten, and Garten officials look at efficiency in all of its services, office practices and purchases.

"As a nonprofit, we don't have a lot of capital," McAllister said. "It works well for us to be economically and environmentally careful. If a purchase will save on water in the long-term, that may be a good one for us. We look at how quickly a purchase will repay itself and what kind of impact it will have on the environment."

For more information about the EarthWISE program, go to www.mcEarthWISE.net or call 503-365-3188. To contact Garten Services, go to www.garten.org or call 503 581-1984.