

TRANQUILITY IN THE MIDDLE OF A BUSTLING CITY



Habitat Suites opened for business in May 1985. The hotel, a 2-1/2 acre independent property featuring 96 suites catering to long-term guests, was not designed or built with ecological considerations in mind, so they had the task of “greening” the hotel after the fact. Several years ago, Eduardo Longoria and John McCready began directly managing the hotel. Their personal commitment to supporting a sustainable future created a new vision for the business. Soon after, Habitat Suites Hotel became a charter member of the Green Hotels Association, confirming their commitment to sustainable management. In 1997, the City of Austin selected Habitat Suites to receive the “B.E.S.T Success” Award in recognition of its unique and creative business approaches to environmental issues. In 1999, Habitat Suites won the prestigious Texas Excellence Award for small businesses.

Natalie Marquis, Manager, is justifiably proud of the programs they have implemented to encourage, promote and support ecological consciousness.

Natalie has worked closely with several of the City of Austin departments to achieve this level of environmental excellence.

- The Water & Wastewater Department’s programs have helped them improve their air and water quality, and provided waterless urinals, low flow toilets and showerheads. The Water and Wastewater Department also supplied them with aerators for each faucet throughout the property. These aerators keep flow levels constant, but decrease the amount of water by 20-25%.
- The programs offered by the Solid Waste Services Department have provided assistance with improving their waste management by conducting trash audits and implementing aggressive recycling programs.
- Austin Energy’s programs have assisted with duct sealing, weather stripping and caulking, and provided a Commercial Lighting Rebate. Habitat Suites was one of the founding members of the Green Choice, Commercial Power Partner and SmartVendor Programs, and they are eager to participate in future City of Austin programs as they are developed.

When asked what motivated Habitat Suites to implement environmental and conservation programs to such an extent, Natalie explained that she, the staff and management of the hotel consider it an “enlightened self-interest.” She said, “We are stewards of this land and if we don’t take care of it and make an example of it here, how can we get people to

do it at home? Once they are here and see how beautiful it can be, for such a little extra effort, they see how easy it is to do at home without having to make any sacrifices.”

“There is a threefold motivation to sustaining an environmentally friendly goal: the emotional component, the health component, and the financial component.” “We know we are doing the right thing environmentally. Our employees rarely get sick because they are not exposed to harmful chemicals or other health hazards at work. Our guests enjoy our low rates because we don’t want them paying more to do the right thing. We are also helping to support small businesses, many of them local, who provide the environmentally-friendly products that we use.” Habitat Suites also solicits ideas from customers as to what they would like to see, and tries to implement the ideas, if possible”.

For instance, they use magnesium oxide instead of concrete in many of their projects. This is the same material that was used to build the Parthenon and Great Wall of China. It is durable, inert, non-toxic, and can be dyed, painted or stained to resemble many different materials, including marble. Another interesting fact is that they recycle their disposable coffee cups to be used in fire extinguishers.

The hotel has installed a tank on the laundry machine that saves the clean, final rinse water of a wash cycle and uses it for the initial cycle of the next load, saving 20 gallons of water every load. They are planning to build a pond in front of the guesthouse that will capture the air conditioner condensate that now flows out onto the parking lot. Natalie said, “The pond will be inhabited by fish, snails and perhaps a turtle or two to keep the algae cleaned up. This will add to the already abundant wildlife on the property, such as lizards, birds, butterflies, frogs and insects.” They do not use chemical pesticides, but keep unwanted insects under control with natural pyrethrins.

With the help of Austin Energy, they have compared their electric patterns for the 24 months since the programmable thermostats were installed under the PowerPartner Program in September 2001 to that of the 24 months prior. They were pleased to see that their electric consumption was down 11%. Since their occupancy is relatively stable, Natalie attributes the reduction to the proper use of the thermostats.

This reduction was offset by a 3% increase in their energy demand due to some remodeling projects. Even with the increase in their demand component, they were pleased to see that their overall energy cost was down by 4%. Their energy costs might have actually gone up if they hadn’t enrolled in the first offering of the Green Choice Program, which resulted in a 24% reduction in their fuel charge.

From Habitat’s perspective, however, the real value of all their conservation efforts lies outside only the dollar savings, but more in the fact that their energy reduction resulted in removing an estimated 156 tons of Carbon Dioxide from the atmosphere – the equivalent of planting over 5300 trees in Austin’s parks or removing 34 cars from Austin’s streets.

As a result of their environmental and conservation efforts, their overall utility bill is in the 23-27% range of their total expenses. This fact strongly refutes the perception that it is too expensive to be environmentally sound.

It was interesting to note that Habitat Suites' employees are paid approximately 30% more than comparable jobs in other hotels because of their conservation measures. Turnover is non-existent; their newest employee has been there for three years. They actually have a waiting list of people who want to work there. Their employees have their own little "community" on the property; a support system, a "family", and they take care of each other as well as hotel patrons. Guests see the same faces visit after visit. An astounding 85% of Habitat Suites' business is from repeat customers. "If they know you have an interest in them, it affects them in a very positive way." says Natalie.

She points out that the employees have cleared a small space in the rear of the parking lot, next to the compost and mulch area, to grow a community garden. From savings realized by using the environmental programs, workers receive money each year to buy seeds and starter plants, tend their gardens, and enjoy the fruits, vegetables and herbs that they harvest. Guests are also invited to partake of the many herbs and consumable (edible and medicinal) plants that grow so profusely on the grounds, and many of the plants are used in the hotel kitchen.

There is a gentleness about the property, that translates into the people – employees and guests. The hotel observes "quiet hours" from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m., and anyone who violates this rule is asked to leave the premises, pay for their suite as well as the suite of the guest (s) they disturbed, and are placed on a "Do Not Register" list.

Natalie occupies a suite on the property, so she can be on call when guests need something. The hotel does no advertising and does not need to, as word of mouth referrals and repeat customers keep it booked almost constantly. Habitat Suites enjoys a large portion of the environmental community's business since it is devoted to "clean and green" practices. During a recent solar conference, this was the hotel of choice. Green Building customers are also frequent guests.

Natalie says she has always enjoyed very positive and responsive experiences when working with Austin Energy staff. She cites an example regarding the first generation of programmable thermostats that were installed at the hotel (SuperStats®). Completely unforeseen by either Austin Energy's PowerPartner staff or by Natalie, even though the thermostats saved considerable energy, guests were changing the room's temperature by altering the thermostat's programming. This resulted in staff having to spend a lot of time reprogramming thermostats after the guests checked out. Austin Energy's Power Partner staff performed extensive research, and was able to test another thermostat solution that has eliminated the problem (SmartSystems®). Currently, ten suites have SmartSystems units, and Austin Energy is planning to replace the SuperStats in the remaining suites soon.



Programmable Thermostat



VendingMiser

During a planning meeting at the hotel, the Power Partner staff also recommended installing a VendingMiser on their soft drink machine, which has been done. The VendingMiser features an occupancy sensor that turns off the vending machine's compressor when no one is present, while keeping beverages cold and saving about \$100 per machine per year in energy cost.

Although there is an initial cost to install the equipment, by taking advantage of the numerous environmental conservation programs offered by the City of Austin, payback is fast, and savings are realized very quickly. For example, they incurred NO expense to obtain their recycle kit, and also received a City of Austin rebate on it. Natalie stated, "When we have to replace a piece of equipment, my first call is to the City of Austin. We have saved by participating in the City's programs every single time."

Natalie recommends that all commercial enterprises take advantage of as many of the City of Austin's programs as possible. If customers don't use the City's programs, they may be discontinued. These programs help keep business' operating costs low, saving money to invest in other improvements.

When asked if she plans to participate in future energy projects with Austin Energy, Natalie says enthusiastically, "Yes! We want to be first on the list to participate in the Solar Rebate Program as soon as it is up and running."