

The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce Green Committee

The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce Green Committee (SLCC-GC) has been working on multiple fronts to help Silver Lake become a model of progressive environmental practice – with the hope of inspiring similar initiatives in other communities citywide.

The Chamber has contributed enormously to Silver Lake’s national reputation as a forward-looking, inclusive and creative community – and felt uniquely qualified to lead in the implementation of sustainable business practices, eco-education and district-wide waste reduction. Thus was born the idea of the Green Committee.

“Our board leaders knew a spotlight was on Silver Lake as a grassroots pocket of Los Angeles,” notes SLCC Treasurer and SLCC-GC founder Ann Le. “It was clear to us that if Silver Lake could be on the bleeding edge of moving our community in the right direction, the rest of the city would certainly follow.”

After much vibrant brainstorming in Chamber meetings and mixers, the Committee was founded in July 2007; now over 20 members strong, it is currently co-chaired by Meg Dickler-Taylor (owner of Large Marge Sustainables catering) and Leslie VanKeuren (General Manager of gingergrass restaurant), with considerable input, guidance and support from such Chamber stalwarts as SLCC President Dr. Cheryl Revkin (a chiropractor in private practice and founder of the Silver Lake Health & Professional Center), Allan Lee Haskell and Herminia M. Rivera (of Catergreen! Zero Waste Solutions and an environmental consultant for green events in Los Angeles, respectively), Ann Bradley (a long-time environmental activist), Silver Lake Chamber Glendale Blvd. Representative Erika Glass (of still yoga), Jenna Didier (of Fountainhead Water Systems Design and the architecture and landscape research center Materials & Applications) and numerous others.

The SLCC-GC focuses on issues of sustainability, waste and energy-use reduction and similar concerns, furthering the Chamber’s mandate to serve the residents and businesses of Silver Lake.

Le was pursuing a degree from UCLA’s Anderson School of Management at the time of the SLCC-GC’s formation, and brought much of what she learned in her academic work to bear in shaping its mission. Still, she insists, the Chamber board was firmly unified in executing the committee’s mandate.

“The board felt ‘greenification’ was often being misused for marketing purposes,” Le explains. “We were frequently approached with green opportunities and wanted to be a filter to distinguish between legitimate initiatives that could have real impact and opportunists trying to ride the green wave. Our biggest concern was making sure that ‘green’ and ‘sustainability’ weren’t just meaningless buzzwords. We wanted to create a thoughtful committee that surveyed all the possibilities and provided value for our membership – not just jump on the next big ‘green’ thing.”

2008 has seen the SLCC-GC launch a drive to make Silver Lake’s famed Sunset Junction Street Fair a “zero waste” event; work aggressively to persuade all local food businesses to eliminate Styrofoam, plastic and paper take-out products and switch to compostable containers and cutlery, and to begin using food-waste bins for composting; hold workshops on reducing pollution from storm-water runoff; call for and assist in the elimination of all new single-use plastic bags in Silver Lake; circulate information about green roofing and walls, among other eco-friendly building and retrofitting practices; encourage the use and expansion of the public transportation network available in Silver Lake; and further refine the green practices of the SLCC itself.

The ambitious Sunset Junction initiative is a multi-tiered effort. The SLCC-GC has worked closely with the gathering’s founder, Michael McKinley, and his fellow organizers in pursuit of its “zero waste” ethos, getting them to agree to use a waste-collection service (Athens Services) that separates recyclable materials but also to offer discrete recycling bins during the event to raise public awareness, through the assistance of the SLCC-GC’s Herminia M. Rivera, Environmental Consultant, and active SLCC-GC member and zero waste planner Michelle Yahn. The slogan for the effort is “Think Before You Toss.” It has also targeted street-fair vendors, who’ve been enlisted to transition to biodegradable serving materials and assist in food-waste recycling, and solicited volunteer “bin angels” to encourage festival attendees to recycle paper, plastic, glass and food waste.

“Plastic bags and Styrofoam blight our landscape, and garbage fees are mounting,” declares Ann Bradley. “No plastic and Styrofoam is a win-win for everyone.”

“We generate landfill when we don’t think before we toss,” adds SLCC-GC co-chair Leslie VanKeuren, General Manager of the popular Silver Lake restaurant gingergrass, who notes that Los Angeles offers monetary incentives for food-waste recycling. “We’re happy to meet with any restaurant owner or manager to help them participate.”

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The committee's work on this front has extended well beyond Sunset Junction. SLCC-GC members have brought "zero-waste" packets (developed by the committee's Dr. Cheryl Revkin and Meher McArthur) to numerous Silver Lake eateries to encourage the adoption of compostable containers and serving ware as well as the recycling of food waste – including meats, dairy and fats. Participating restaurants pay a fee (to cover the cost of special recycling bins), but first-year participants receive an 80% discount. And, as Dickler-Taylor points out, "Once these food businesses implement our guidelines and practices, they will produce less and less waste – and collection fees will go down naturally."

But being ecologically responsible is about more than just filling up bins or having a better to-go container for one's noodles. The SLCC-GC's Jenna Didier, of Materials & Applications, has also moved forward – in collaboration with the office of City Council District 13, the city's Environmental Affairs Department, and Meg Dickler-Taylor (SLCC-GC Co-Chair) – in adopting guidelines for a pilot Green Business Certification Program in Silver Lake to help businesses respond to challenges of the urban environment. Although the primary purpose of these guidelines – based on those adopted by Santa Monica, San Francisco and other cities – is to protect our planet, businesses that adopted similar policies have reported substantial monetary savings as well.

This alliance has fostered a series of workshops (developed by Didier and hosted by All Shades of Green, an eco-boutique managed by SLCC-GC member Natalie Freidberg) to raise awareness about the devastating pollution caused by storm-water runoff – and how good planning can both significantly reduce the damage and conserve water and money. "In times of peak flow, the Los Angeles River carries 183,000 cubic feet of polluted water per second out to the Pacific Ocean," relates Didier. "Fortunately, architects, designers and other professionals in our community are developing some very creative solutions to reduce and purify what we're dumping into our storm drains."

The workshops additionally focus on how roofs and walls made from eco-friendly materials can not only improve life but also save lives. These materials reduce the often lethal "heat island effect" of urban environments, absorbing heat and providing insulation – protecting residents from the health risks of extreme temperatures and reducing the economic and environmental costs of cooling and heating.

The SLCC-GC has launched its own section on the Chamber's website, silverlakechamber.com, and will furnish the Silver Lake community with fresh ideas about sustainability, recycling, waste reduction and more in a bi-monthly e-newsletter generated by SLCC-GC members Dr. Cheryl Revkin, Ben Lemon (a financial planner), Jenny Rask of AskWoollyM.typepad.com, and Dawn Andrews. Interested parties can subscribe by contacting green@silverlakechamber.com.

Under the guidance of Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce creative director David Etzen (of redbar), the Chamber itself has long pursued the most responsible policies regarding its own output, printing its directory with an eco-audit on 100% recycled paper for the past five years. The SLCC newsletter has been printed on recycled-content paper for five years, as have its letterhead, envelopes and business cards (which have been 100% recycled since 2005). With the SLCC-GC's guidance, the Chamber will continue to refine its environmental practices.

The SLCC-GC's committed, creative collective of professionals present a prime example of how ingenuity and dedication to community can bring about exciting local responses to global challenges. The SLCC-GC's work on this "bleeding edge" will undoubtedly aid in the healing of our world. □ □ □ □ □

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SLCC-GC Mission Statement

The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce Green Committee commits to assisting local businesses and the community in adopting sustainable practices through education, outreach, and incentives.