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Moving Sustainability Forward in Portland

By COLIN MINER

It was standing room only as leaders from government, nonprofit, academic and business groups gathered for two days of meetings in Oregon last week — part of the [Portland Metro Climate Prosperity Project](#), which seeks to promote sustainability in the region.

Much of the conversation focused on three basic themes: how fighting climate change can make money, save money and reduce carbon emissions.

“There was a general feeling among a lot of people, especially the businesses, that when it came to the first two they were absolutely on board,” said Rex Burkholder, a council member of [Metro](#), and Oregon regional government representing three counties and 25 cities in the Portland area. “And that for the third, if it works out that way, great. They’re all for it.”

Gillian Floren from Greenlight Greater Portland, a private sector economic development group and one of the organizers, said that “whereas ten years ago someone would bring up green or sustainability and they would be dissed, scoffed at. Now they’re seeing it as an opportunity.”

She gave the example of a local fiberglass company that used to center its business around making vehicle interiors and had fallen on hard times.

“Then they saw that the blades from solar wind towers were made from fiberglass and that presented an opportunity,” Ms. Floren said. “And while they’re not out of the woods, it’s helped them rebound.”

Ms. Floren also spoke of a company specializing in building and automotive interiors that has seized on the movement toward green as a way to not only limit damage from the recession but to develop new areas of business.

“They’ve been developing new car batteries for hybrid vehicles, they’ve tried to be innovative when it comes to materials they use in buildings,” she said. “That’s really what we’ve been seeing throughout the business sector — people innovating.”

A variety of green-themed panels covered topics from “Growing the Regional Market for Green Goods and Services,” to “Nurturing the Green Workforce and Growing Green Jobs.”

But Mr. Burkholder said that the real function of the meetings was “find out where we are, what our strengths are, what we have to build on and what we have to build up.”

“It was great watching business cards being handed out all over the place as all these people realized this isn’t just about helping the environment,” he added. “It’s about developing economic opportunities.”