

## Green practices help business grow

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MURFREESBORO – When Warby Parker looked to locate a corporate office in Nashville in 2014, one of the first questions asked was about green-business practices and sustainability in Tennessee.

“We founded Warby Parker with the goal of demonstrating that for-profit businesses can do good in the world, and acting sustainably has always been an important part of that mission,” said Neil Blumenthal, co-founder and co-CEO of Warby Parker.

Blumenthal is one of 93 percent of CEOs who believe sustainability issues will be critical to the future success of their businesses, according to a 2013 Accenture Survey.

Since it’s an important topic for many businesses, the Tennessee Valley Authority has developed Valley Sustainable Communities, a program that helps cities inventory their sustainable assets and present them to interested industries.

And when representatives from Warby Parker asked about sustainable practices, “Nashville was able to take its inventory out and talk about it,” said Heidi Smith, VSC general manager.

Smith said TVA started the program because it kept seeing questions in “requests for information” from different companies looking to relocate or expand in Tennessee.

“A lot of communities couldn’t answer well and didn’t have the talking points they needed,” she said.

When companies look at Rutherford County, the question comes up often, said Brian Hercules, vice president of Economic Development for the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce.

“When a client goes to the next step and dives deeper by written information or even better a site visit, it will be a question,” he said. “We believe it has become a way to gauge the social character of our community.”

To help with the process, Smith said, TVA hired Boyette Strategic Advisors and developed a plan to survey sustainable projects across its service area, which includes all of Tennessee and parts of Kentucky, Alabama and Mississippi, and small slices of Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.

“They helped put together the framework, so communities could submit information to a database of sustainable projects with a tie to economic development,” Smith said.

TVA in 2012 launched the program that awards communities points in 15 categories covering policies and practices that contribute to sustainability with an emphasis on components that directly impact economic development efforts, she explained.

Smith said TVA has marketed the program, which categorized 28 communities in seven states, to site-selection companies and “companies we know care about sustainability.”



MTSU's chapter of Students for Environmental Action planted tree around its 525-acre campus. (Photo: Submitted)

In the time since it launched, Murfreesboro has been designated as a “gold community,” Nashville as a “platinum community” and Clarksville as a “silver community.” Smyrna and La Vergne have not participated.

“It shows progressiveness in the community that they are willing to gather the information and market themselves in this way,” said Millie Callaway, VSC project manager.

After signing up for the program in 2014, Hercules said he found more sustainable projects than he expected with Middle Tennessee State University being one of the city’s best assets.

Joe Whitefield, assistant vice president for MTSU facilities services, said the university has a long history of energy and environmental stewardship.

“We evaluate our energy and sustainability projects according to a triple bottom line — (1) economic, (2) environmental, and (3) social benefits,” he said.

With an eye on that bottom line, Whitefield said, MTSU has implemented a number of sustainable projects, not limited to adding a student fee that funds clean-energy projects, a 10kW solar panel, pervious concrete, storm water and recycling programs and traffic management that reduces greenhouse emissions from vehicles.



As a Sustainability Team member in the TVA Valley Sustainable Communities application process, MTSU outlined green initiatives on its 525-acre campus, he said.

Hercules said MTSU was a key part in the city getting the “gold community” status.

“Being able to validate our communities efforts to be stewards of our natural assets through TVA is like earning the old ‘Good Housekeeping’ seal,” he said.

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