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DNC visitors can't escape 'greenness'

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August 25, 2008 - 4:29 PM

By R. SCOTT RAPPOLD
THE GAZETTE

DENVER · Paula Grey pulled the plastic box from the trash and studied it intently.

"I don't know," said Grey, a "greening crew" volunteer from Denver, unable to determine if it is recyclable or not. "When in doubt, recycle."

She was only the first line of defense, watching the trash cans and recycle bins at one of dozens of stations outside the Pepsi Center. Other hands would be going through the same trash before it goes to a recycling center, compost heap or - despite their best efforts - a landfill. So goes the trash management strategy at the Democratic National Convention in Denver.

"It's important for quality of life reasons. It's consistent with who Denver is as a community and it's also an economic development niche," said Parry Burnap, who has been working since last summer as Director of Greening for Denver Host Committee.

And digging through trash is only part of it. "Denver is proud of being a sustainable city and being increasingly recognized as such."

When Denver was announced as the host for the DNC, Mayor John Hickenlooper decided it would be the "greenest" national political convention ever.

Visitors encounter the overwhelming "greenness" of it all long before they reach the Pepsi Center. At their hotels, they are encouraged to turn off the air conditioning and lights as they leave. Their key cards, at many hotels, are made not out plastic, but "sustainably harvested" wood. An in-room display encourages water conservation.

A Green Vendor Directory lets them know which businesses are environmentally friendly. A "Lean 'N Green" menu option at area restaurants lets them know a particular food is locally grown.

Visitors can even ride away with a free bike - as long as they bring it back. Health insurer Humana donated 1,000 bicycles, to provide an alternative to driving.

"They're free. We just ask people to bring an ID and a credit card," said Humana spokesman Mitch Lubitz, working at the bike station across from the Denver Convention Center. "We want to promote bike riding, people getting well, being healthy, living a better life. Saving on gas, benefiting the environment, those are good things as well."

As of 4 p.m. Monday, more than 1,200 people had ridden the borrowed bikes 788 miles. It was tough to cruise too

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fast on Denver's gridlocked streets, and those with convention credentials couldn't ride the bikes within five blocks of the Pepsi Center. But still the program seemed popular.

"It's the most cost-effective, most convenient and it's free," said David Steltz, a Barak Obama campaign volunteer from Wisconsin. He also agreed it was environmentally friendly.

"It's a good gesture towards it. When you look at the streets, it's still full of vehicles," Steltz said. "I'm not riding in a taxi. I'm not taking a bus. I'm riding a bike."

The company will leave 70 of the bikes here, so Denver officials can launch their own bike-borrowing program.

Kristy Milligan, of Colorado Springs, came to Denver Monday with her mother, sister and a friend, and rode the light rail. Part of the reason was money - they figured the \$8 round-trip for each was still less than they would pay to park.

But, Milligan said, "We're trying to be environmentally conscious. We carpooled up, in the spirit of the convention."

Once credentialed delegates, reporters and others pierce the layers of checkpoints and reach the Pepsi Center, recycling stations greet them. Each has at least three cans, one for recyclable containers and paper, one for food waste to compost, and one for the landfills. Organizers hope to recycle or compost 85 percent of the convention's waste, an ambitious goal.

The fuel for convention vehicles comes from waste beer turned into ethanol by Coors. The electricity comes from wind power, supplied by Xcel. Some of the measures, such as the "Lean 'N Green" food guidelines, have been lampooned by conservatives as evidence of liberal environmentalism gone amok.

Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" was at the convention mocking the "green" measures. Standing in front of a closed row of stands, one correspondent quipped, "They so green, they're not even open."

Brian Keane, president of SmartPower, a group that encourages the use of renewable energy, is speaking at several events around Denver this week. The "caricatures," he said, don't detract from the successes.

"The best way to get people to want to try this stuff is to show them clean energy works," Keane said. "When the convention is running on clean renewable energy and the lights stay on, that's a big 'Aha' for the American people."

Denver officials, meanwhile, hope to make it a template for environmentally friendly conventions in the future, and permanently establish a "green" image. Said Burnap, "The whole world will be watching Denver, so any chance we get to tell the story, we will."

Despite all the fuss inside the Pepsi Center over recycling and composting, there was a decidedly less-green scene outside the arena Monday night.

Dozens of large buses -- bound for hotels -- sat idling for at least a half hour waiting for delegates to emerge after

the evening's speeches. Clouds of diesel fumes choked the night air.

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