

## Yes, in My Backyard

EcoCenter strives to be greenest building in Utah

**A** GUTTURAL, SOMEWHAT OFF-KEY, trumpet-like call echoes across the boundary of Park City's Swaner Nature Preserve. Two spindly-legged sandhill cranes peer across an imaginary line where shopping-mall cement gives way to 1,200 acres of wildflowers and recently restored riparian zones. It is here—alongside a shiny, new hotel and future Best Buy—where Swaner EcoCenter emerges as an ecological ambassador.

Located adjacent to the preserve, the \$7.5 million EcoCenter, slated for completion in September 2008, is a grand exhibit in itself. The building will have all the bells and whistles: an interactive climbing wall, time-lapse photographic exhibits, a 400-foot pier leading into the preserve, and a four-story observation tower. Constantly evolving technological exhibits will delve into headline topics and instantly connect visitors to a digital collage of local, regional, national, and international news and images. Small children will climb through the upland and wetland "treasure hunt" exhibits, and the naturalist room will house an environmental library.

"Our underlying goal is to inspire respect for the natural world in everyone that visits the center. We want them to leave inspired and empowered," says Colleen Rush, CEO of the 10,000 square-foot, environmentally friendly Swaner EcoCenter. And while some may note its diminutive size, proponents would likely point out that it's the efficiency of the building, and not the size, that matters. Less is considered more in most buildings that promote sustainability, a fact echoed by the Audubon Center at Debs Park in Los Angeles. At a compact 5,023 square feet, this EcoCenter gained Platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy Efficiency and Design) status, the highest level of LEED certification in 2004, making it one of the greenest buildings in the nation at that time.

Hoping to claim the title of greenest building in Utah, the non-profit Swaner EcoCenter is also pursuing Platinum status

for its new structure. There are currently no Platinum-level buildings in Utah, according to U.S. Green Building Council's Ashley Katz. Until the project is completed, it can't be given the greenest light. If it does certify at the Platinum level, Katz says "they'll be the first in the state."

The EcoCenter's design, which Rush says will be 53.5 percent more efficient than a typical, similarly sized building, mirrors the core components of the healthy ecology in its backyard: water, sunlight, earth, and air.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWANER NATURE PRESERVE

**I**N AN ARID SKI TOWN, water is nothing short of liquid gold. Rush explains that low-flow toilets, faucets, and showers, as well as waterless urinals will help cut down on water consumption

in the building. The pièce de résistance, however, is the structure's rooftop rain and snowmelt collection system. Two cisterns will gather up to 40,000 gallons of water, and will supply the EcoCenter's landscape irrigation and toilet flushing needs for an entire year.

"It's spooky how closely this building reflects a lot of the ecological systems out on the preserve," says Sumner Swaner, chairman of the non-profit organization's board whose family founded the preserve in 1993 in his late father's honor. Locally, Park City's rooftop is Jupiter Peak, where snow lands and then melts into an underground aquifer ("nature's cistern," as Swaner describes it). The water travels north until it dead-ends in Snyderville Basin's box canyon, where it springs to the surface nurturing the fauna and flora of the preserve.

The preserve's ongoing restoration efforts include annual willow plantings, which, as any photosynthesis-savvy fourth-grader knows, need both water and sunlight to grow. The EcoCenter's rooftop solar panels will act like the willow in harvesting the sun's energy. Rachel David of Cooper Roberts Simonsen Associates, the architectural firm that's overseeing the project and its LEED certification, expects that the energy from the center's photovoltaic array and hot water panels



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWANER NATURE PRESERVE

**Left: A sandhill crane chick nestles in a hiding spot of protected habitat in the Swaner Nature Preserve. Above: The 10,000 square-foot Swaner Eco-Center will be adjacent to Park City's Swaner Nature Preserve, which provides more than 1,200 acres of critical habitat for animal and plant species.**

(solar panels that provide on-site electricity and hot water for the building) will provide 9.6 percent of the building's total electricity consumption, 85 percent of the domestic hot water load, and 14 percent of the radiant floor heating.

Architect Søren Simonsen of Cooper Roberts Simonsen Associates explains that the solar panels that produce electricity on-site are among the most cutting-edge elements of the design, but says that the overall efficiency of the building is a product of all the systems at work. The building also benefits from passive solar and shading design, glazed windows insulated with argon gas, light-colored roofing and decking, and an evaporative cooling system that uses no refrigerants. Any offsite electricity will be purchased from renewable sources, says Simonsen.

**T**HOUGH THERE'S A PRESUMPTION that the mountains lack the pollutants of big city congestion, air quality is another point of emphasis for the EcoCenter. After all, Summit County is a rapidly growing place. Just a few decades ago, a two-lane road led from Kimball Junction into Park City proper.

No stoplights. No Whole Foods store. No ski jumps. With mining on the decline and skiing on the rise, the resort town's entry corridor was a rural painting of cud-chewing cattle masking the idling traffic and developments to come.

As Swaner, who worked his family's ranch in the 1960s can attest, those seemingly benign bovines demolished every last bit of prairie grass in their path by summer's end. Now, the acreage is protected by conservation easements, and the preserve's restoration projects have brought back the native pre-ranching and pre-dairy farming vegetation and critters. Yet, the surrounding suburbia and retail shops—not to mention a major interstate splitting the preserve in two—means that the nature center, rural as it may be, is surrounded by development. "Had we not built here," explains Rush, "it would have been developed anyway. Instead of just another shop or restaurant, visitors will have a unique opportunity that they won't usually find in the heart of retail development."

One of the EcoCenter's goals is to redefine the organization that was formerly known as the Swaner Nature Preserve,

This new, green structure is designed to bring humans to a closer understanding of the environment, making that fuzzy and sometimes overwhelming concept of eco-friendliness accessible and real.

allowing the non-profit to embrace community-wide projects, in addition to focusing on school programs and land restoration projects. In keeping with its mission “to preserve, educate, and nurture,” Rush sees the center as a vehicle for greatly expanded educational programs. The non-profit envisions hosting everything from organic wine tastings to a film series to stargazing events; they also plan to establish one of Dr. Jane Goodall’s Roots & Shoots community service programs onsite.

The EcoCenter plans on supplying employees with showers and locker rooms to encourage staff to walk, bike, or cross-country ski to work. But, mitigating pollutants isn’t just a matter of limiting vehicular traffic. Keeping chemicals out of building materials ensures healthy breathing and limits run-off of nasty particles into the neighboring wetlands.

“A lot of people don’t realize that almost all paints, glues, sealants, stains, and plywood contain harmful chemicals that, once they’re installed, off-gas,” says Rush, who points out that volatile organic compounds (VOCs)—that “new carpet smell”—has been linked to everything from headaches to serious neurological disorders. With the health of the EcoCenter’s and preserve’s inhabitants in mind, the non-profit has pledged to use materials containing zero formaldehyde and very low VOCs.

**T**HE ECOCENTER’S “earth” component hones in on the three Rs: reducing, reusing, and recycling. To that end, you’ll find everything from wood timbers salvaged from the Great Salt Lake to shredded denim insulation. Rapidly renewable materials like bamboo and sorghum stalk are used for flooring, cabinetry, and accents, and are complemented by post-industrial recycled products. Fly ash, a byproduct of coal-powered electric plants, makes up 25 percent of the cement mix in the building’s concrete, and the steel is at least 80 percent recycled. Everything, from carpet



**Swaner EcoCenter aims to call itself the greenest building in Utah, pending its certification as a Platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy Efficiency and Design) building.**

COURTESY OF SWANER NATURE PRESERVE

to cabinetry to the sunflower seed countertops, incorporates recycled content. And, being that it’s rooted quite literally in the earth, the center’s landscaping will serve as a showcase of native and drought-tolerant species.

Water, sunlight, air, and earth don’t exist in their own independent vacuums. Rather, interconnected systems are at work, both in nature and the

EcoCenter. As Simonsen explains, “In sustainable design, it’s seldom one big thing that you do.”

And that’s really the point of the entire project.

This new, green structure is designed to bring humans to a closer understanding of the environment, making that fuzzy and sometimes overwhelming concept of eco-friendliness accessible and real.

“People are motivated to do something environmental in their lives, but they don’t know how,” says Rush. “What the last decade has done is illuminate these environmental issues for people and sometimes make them seem daunting. I think our job, now and in the future, is to empower people to engage. They don’t have to go and buy a new car. It can be as simple as changing a light bulb.”

Simonsen hopes that the project helps people say, “Hey, that’s an idea I can incorporate into my home.”

With development already saturating the landscape, environmental sensitivity is a priority for a place that sits literally and figuratively on the edge. Here, where a patchwork of easements creates vital habitat, water, sunlight, earth, and air are not an afterthought. And that pair of sandhill cranes—two of thirteen sighted this year—might just be proof that the Swaner EcoCenter’s diplomatic efforts on behalf of humans and nature are paying off.

*Jane Gendron stopped in Park City on what was meant to be a cross-country trek and never left. She’s written for Fodor’s Travel Guides, Utah Business, Las Vegas Life and Estates West magazines.*