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**ECOfreak: Oil on Their Shirts, Green in Their Hearts**

Desiree Parker  
Posted: Tuesday, June 2nd, 2009

They're like eco-cowboys, the men who are part of Environmental Management Services in Williamsburg. Okay, maybe they're more like eco-cheerleaders, but they won't like me calling them that.

I had no idea what in the world EMS was, or why it was at the city shop building. If we're being completely honest here, I didn't even know where the building was.

And I'll tell you, when I got there I realized I might be a little out of my element. There's no door to go through that I could see, so I had to peek under the garage door and yell hello to the mechanics who were there servicing city vehicles. Not a place you're likely to find me on most days.

I met Paul Reeser (the water/sewer superintendent) and Mike Lesniak (vehicle maintenance supervisor), two fellas who are part of the four-person EMS team. Bob Debellis (with street maintenance) and Lucas Jenne (in landscape), are the other two. The idea was to have a representative of each section in public works and utilities in the group.

About 6 years ago, the city sent Reeser and three other guys from public works and utilities over to a Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement class aimed at helping government agencies develop EMS teams. The city paid about \$30,000 for the men to take a series of three, three-day classes.

"It really showed the commitment of the city to better environmental practices," says Lesniak. "And this program, it really works."

So, what does the team do? I expected to get there and hear about how they're recycling a little more paper, maybe they got some energy-efficient light bulbs. The truth is, these guys – and all the men over at the shop – are doing some completely awesome stuff.

We were standing in the middle of the auto shop, and that's one of the first places the EMS team focused their attention when their class was over. The shop takes care of all the city, fire and police cars, which they used to take outside and wash right in the parking lot. There went thousands of gallons of water, right down the drain. Now, the entire fleet (except for the fire trucks) goes through a carwash that uses recycled water.

Also, the team arranged for a recycling company to buy their scrap metal. According to Reeser, they've recycled about 250,000 pounds since that class 6 years ago. That adds up to about \$18,000.

**Talk of the Town**

June 2009

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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21	22	23	24	25	26	27
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To help add to the scrap-metal pile, the EMS team has purchased some really neat equipment. One of these is a strange looking contraption in the shop that drains 99 percent of the oil out of oil filters, and then crushes the filter for recycling. They also have a gizmo in the street shop that punctures and removes gasses and old paint from spray paint bottles. Voila! You can now recycle paint cans. How cool.

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It's not just metal these guys are recycling, either. They recycle oil and paper. They even recycle oil rags and reuse the dirty water they use to rinse out pesticide and herbicide containers. Instead of taking trash out two or three times a day, they take it out every two weeks.

Their buildings have mercury-free, energy-efficient lights and their bathrooms have light timers. They use a water-based parts-cleaner instead of a chemical-based one.

"We don't just go out and buy chemicals any more," says Reeser. "First we ask, is it okay for the environment? Can we recycle it? It's just a whole different mindset."

They recycle so much of their landscape waste into mulch that, of the 4,500 yards of mulch they use in a year, they only have to buy 8 to 10 yards.

Forget tree-huggers. Sign me up to be an eco-public-works-hugger.

The biggest project they've undertaken so far, according to Reeser and Lesniak, was the city storage shed in the back of the public works lot. It was completed in 2007, and is used to store sand and salt for the street crews. It doesn't sound like a big deal, but before the shed the stuff just sat in piles in the yard, and (though it was covered by tarps) when it rained, the rain would wash salt right into the storm drains.

Their hard work has been recognized, at least by the Department of Environmental Quality. The Williamsburg public works and utilities earned the super-exclusive E4 status through the Virginia Environmental Excellence Program (a DEQ program). Only 17 other organizations in the state are on the E4 list.

If I had an Eco Freak award, I'd give it to them, too.

Next time you drive by the municipal building at 401 Lafayette Street, give the public works guys (who work behind it) an eco-hero honk. On second thought, that might be a little loud. Maybe you should just wave.

***ECOfreak is Desiree Parker's weekly green blog on the things and people making the world a healthier place to live. Email her at [desiree@wydaily.com](mailto:desiree@wydaily.com).***



Comments 

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derek  
Posted 2009-06-02 11:04:00  
[derek@tideradio.com](mailto:derek@tideradio.com)

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Great Article Desiree!

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Williamsburg resident  
Posted 2009-06-02 09:04:33

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Awesome! I especially like how they've reduced the amount of trash generated--a huge reduction. Keep up the ECOfreak news.

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Bill Brown  
Posted 2009-06-02 08:44:11

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As an employee of public works,I am proud of the work my teammates have acheived with this program. We are truly a "GREEN CITY".

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Milissa England Stubblefield  
Posted 2009-06-02 08:13:55  
[milissa77@gmail.com](mailto:milissa77@gmail.com)

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Wow, good to know. Thanks for the article. And thank you to the EMS!!

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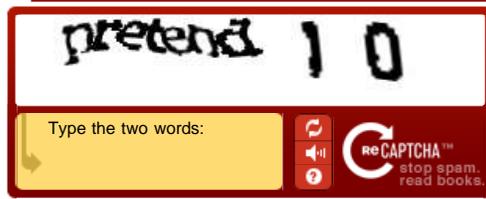
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