



Green party

Folk Festival nearly 100% friendly to the environment

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Updated: 07/20/2009 09:08:29 AM EDT

LOWELL -- When you munch on ethnic delicacies at the Lowell Folk Festival this weekend, you can be assured that your appetite will contribute very little to greenhouse-gas emissions.

The disposable plastic utensils, including forks to knives, are all made of corn.

Cups and plates are made of paper because vendors have pledged to avoid petroleum-based plastics and aluminum.

Everything you dump into trash cans will go straight to a special transfer station set up on-site, where scores of volunteers weed out recyclables from compostables with their hands and trained eyes.

It's all part of the "zero waste" program, an initiative to which the festival committed itself a decade ago, said Pat Scanlon, who oversees the recycling program.

The Lowell Folk Festival, an annual three-day celebration of cultural diversity, kicks off Friday. The weekendlong festivities typically draw tens of thousands of people to the city from across the country, offering a chance to enjoy a wide range of music and art performances, exhibitions and food.

Those who attend the event may not realize there are an army of volunteers working hard behind the scenes to minimize the festival's carbon footprint.

These "vendor captains" walk from one booth to another to ensure that merchants are using only biodegradable wares to serve food, as required by the contracts.

Between the patrol and composting efforts, the program has managed to keep 95 percent of the waste from the festival out of landfills, earning the Environmental Protection Agency's recognition as a national model for special-event recycling programs, Scanlon said.

The initiative began 10 years ago, when festival organizers solicited help from Scanlon, an Andover resident who founded MassRecycling -- a coalition of individuals and institutions dedicated to reducing waste -- in 1989.

The Lowell festival began after three successful years of hosting the National Lowell Folk Festival in the city. Currently co-producing the festivities are the city of Lowell, the Lowell Festival Foundation, Lowell National Historical Park and the National Council for the Traditional Arts.

Scanlon, who used to work as recycling director for Wheelabrator, a waste-management company in North Andover, said true efforts to reduce waste involve more than just targeting "low-hanging fruit" like collecting empty soda bottles. He decided to go after the source of the festival waste -- the food vendors.

Scanlon created a network of volunteers involving many children participating in local youth programs, such as the YWCA. Many volunteers go around downtown Lowell during the festival to pick up recyclables from the 44-gallon blue rubber containers placed next to 55-gallon metallic trash cans, while the city takes other trash to composting yards.

Since its inception, the Lowell Folk Festival has composted 267,000 meals and recycled 230,837 bottles and cans, and distributed 3,000 bags of compost to visitors.

Festival organizers elsewhere are now modeling their programs after Lowell's, and young volunteers are applying their knowledge to start recycling efforts at the organizations they belong to, generating revenue for programs from selling recyclables.

Sponsors, including Wheelabrator, help fund Scanlon's consulting service and keep the program going.

Scanlon said his experience goes back to the mid-1970s, when he started a recycling program as a juvenile-offender parole caseworker in Somerville.

"I knew that, if we could come up with a program that is successful at the Lowell Folk Festival, we could create a model that could help people around the country understand how to do this kind of program," Scanlon said.

For more information about the festival, visit www.lowellfolkfestival.org.

www.lowellsun.com

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