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Green generates green

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Jason Stein Wisconsin State Journal

Consultant Sonya Newenhouse owns two Madison businesses and most of a third - but has no car.

Newenhouse is one of the new breed of eco-entrepreneurs who have made a business out of helping consumers and companies do better for the environment.

Her firm, Madison Environmental Group, is helping customers like Alliant Energy Corp. and The Alexander Co. build eco-friendly buildings and cut down on garbage and the use of energy and cars. The company's growth reflects the mounting pressures - from costs, customers and government - that are pushing businesses to get green.

Rising energy prices are one of the most timely examples, Newenhouse said. "The closer we get to the oil peak, the more our services will be needed."

Stone House Development of Madison wanted to develop a \$15 million residence hall for UW-Platteville starting this summer, but the developers weren't sure they had all the skills needed to respond to the university's demand for an environmentally friendly building, vice president Rich Arnesen said.

Madison Environmental has helped Stone House with plans for everything from the recycling of construction materials to the selection of eco-friendly paints and designs for a possible green roof for capturing storm water, he said. Though some items like the green roof would cost more, other techniques may actually save money on the project, Arnesen said.

"Certainly when I look at a future project, there are definitely ideas we'll be taking away from this project," he said.

Newenhouse started Madison Environmental in 1998 with one other employee "to blend business and the environment." Now the firm has nine workers and annual sales of under \$1 million that are growing at 20 percent a year, Newenhouse said.



Sonya Newenhouse, left, and co-worker Rebecca Grossberg have made a business of encouraging companies and consumers to limit their use of energy and cars. (Joseph W. Jackson III - State Journal)

Along the way the 39-year-old consultant founded Community Car, a service that lets local residents rent a car by the hour rather than own one. Newenhouse now owns two-thirds of the business, which will have gone from four cars to seven by the end of the year, she said.

Newenhouse figures she saved \$1,500 a year by selling her car, joining Community Car and riding a bicycle to work at her firm's offices above L'Etoile Restaurant on the Capitol Square. (The building at 25 N. Pinckney St. is owned by Newenhouse through her third business, Crescent.)

The Fiore Cos. went to Madison Environmental for help getting more workers to ride bicycles or take the bus to the property company's Network 222 building on West Washington Avenue.

Formerly Alliant Energy's headquarters, the building has room for at least 700 workers but only 230 underground parking stalls, said Stacy Nemeth, senior vice president at Fiore. So cutting down on employees who drive to work alone would be a big help in filling vacant space in the building, she said.

After interviewing workers in the building, Madison Environmental recommended steps such as paying employees to give up a stall, selling bus passes in the lobby and installing bike racks that wouldn't damage high-end bicycles.

"They're very passionate about what they do but also very educated and realistic about it," Nemeth said of Newenhouse and her team. "I think they truly understand that this is a process of educating people and slowly changing behavior."

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