

Earth-friendly endeavors:

Wake Robin nurtures a healthy, sustainable community



Guided by a comprehensive plan, this Vermont community practices environmental stewardship and conservation as a way of life—and of doing business

This article profiles the recipient of the 2016 ICAA Innovators Green Award, a category of the Innovators Awards recognizing achievements in environmental stewardship. Presented in three categories, the annual awards honor creativity and excellence in the active-aging industry. They highlight innovations that lead the way, set new standards, and make a difference in the lives of older adults.

In June 2015, the *New York Times* published an article in its “Business Day” section delving into the growing demand

for—and expectations of—green retirement communities.¹ Writer Constance Gustke also mentioned some of the benefits of these “eco-conscious” communities, such as a healthier living environment for older adults and a reduced carbon footprint and financial incentives for providers. Among the communities profiled was Wake Robin in Shelburne, Vermont.

Named for the deep-red trillium flower that grows in the northeastern United States, Wake Robin is a life-plan community that overlooks scenic Lake Champlain. The nonprofit corporation strives “to create an active community of adults that honors both mutual support and independence and addresses the health and

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To support the ecosystem's health, residents of Wake Robin in Shelburne, Vermont, established and maintain a beekeeping operation, which includes harvesting the honey



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Wake Robin residents created and maintain trails through the woods. 'Today, there are five miles of walking and snowshoeing trails on campus,' says Director of Marketing & Resident Services Nancy Chiquoine

wellness needs of each resident," says Director of Marketing & Resident Services Nancy Chiquoine.

Core values at Wake Robin include respect for residents' dignity, independence and goals, exemplified by a "resident-powered" community life.² A nonprofit residents' association has existed on campus from the beginning, according to Chiquoine. The corporation provides financial support and staffing for this association, along with its 50 different resident-run activities and committees.

Environmental stewardship is the other core value at Wake Robin. "We are committed to responsible stewardship of resources, to the beauty and accessibility of our community and surroundings, and to nurturing the environment for a sustainable future,"² its website states.

To support sustainability, Wake Robin developed an Energy Use and Conservation Plan. This comprehensive endeavor garnered the organization the 2016 ICAA Innovators Green Award, which recog-

nizes those that excel at environmental stewardship and wellness. To learn more, the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] asked Nancy Chiquoine and Director of Environmental Services Leslie Parker to describe their community's "earth-friendly" plan and practices.

JAA: *What motivated Wake Robin to embrace environmental stewardship?*

NC: An appreciation of the environment has been part of the Wake Robin culture since the beginning. The founders—Stokes and Mary Jane Gentry and a state-wide committee of like-minded folks—were environmentalists with connections to New York's Adirondacks and an appreciation of Vermont's natural beauty. They wanted both to preserve those special places and to reflect them in a community they created. For this reason, Wake Robin was built 25 years ago on 136 acres, with the look of an Adirondack lodge. Buildings were all named after trees (e.g., Sycamore and Hickory cottages). And geothermal wells were part of the original construction.

LP: There is a strong emphasis in Vermont on being healthy and on local farming and protecting the environment. There are also a lot of laws and initiatives that support green efforts. Environmental activism is part of the culture here. The people who live at Wake Robin believe in sustainability and stewardship, and participate not only willingly, but also as a way of life. That spirit is at the heart of our community's environmental commitment.

JAA: *Please briefly describe the Wake Robin Energy Use and Conservation Plan and its goals.*

NC: Wake Robin's Board of Directors, with input from staff and residents, developed the Energy Use and Conservation Plan to support environmental stewardship. We define this core value as "enhancing ecological sustainability by managing the impact of Wake Robin operations and physical plant on the environment." Our plan depends on teamwork between residents and staff to implement its various elements.

Besides the goals of reduced energy use and decreased carbon emissions, the Wake Robin endeavor focuses on environmental education for residents and staff. We want to ensure that everyone in our community has the skills and knowledge to support our community's efforts to be more energy efficient, preserve natural resources, and conserve woods and wildlife habitats (with the help of a Vermont state forester).

JAA: *What are some of the programs that support the Wake Robin plan?*

LP: Examples of our earth-friendly practices include:

- **Ozone use.** Instead of bleach in Wake Robin's laundry and aquatic center, we switched to environmentally friendlier ozone as a disinfectant, deodorizer,

bleaching agent and cleaning tool. Ozone use has helped reduce our community's carbon footprint by 58,219 lbs. It also saves us in excess of 316,000 gallons of hot water and more than USD\$24,000 each year.

- **Natural pest control.** Over two years, we released some 100,000 ladybugs on campus to reduce the damage that aphids and scale bugs do to the gardens and landscape. By eating these insects, ladybugs control the pests without any damage to the ecosystem.
- **Food choices.** We source food locally whenever possible, which helps us decrease the carbon impact associated with food that travels longer distances. Today, about 40% of the food we serve is local. We also use sustainable and eco-friendly food products.
- **Solar energy.** Wake Robin leases 24 solar trackers [panels that “move with the sun ... to maximize energy production”³] at a solar farm managed by All-Earth Renewables.⁴ Using this source of energy has reduced our on-site energy costs by 24%. In addition, we contribute about 200,000 kilowatt-hours of clean energy to the grid annually, powering homes and businesses.
- **Ridesharing.** Between 2010 and 2016, community staff saved more than 142,000 miles of vehicle travel through our employee ridesharing program. Other benefits have included decreased tailpipe emissions, as well as greater camaraderie and cost savings for participants.

JAA: *What about recycling and composting?*

NC: At Wake Robin, recycling efforts target paper, plastic, metal and glass. Batteries go to a facility in Canada for safe recycling and disposal. Food waste is composted commercially throughout the year, while a resident-initiated program adds a further 600-plus gallons of kitchen waste to the operation. This compost fertilizes resident gardens.



As a member of the farm-to-table Vermont Fresh Network, Wake Robin is committed to using fresh, local foods. In addition, produce is displayed at the Wake Robin Farm Stand, while residents also grow fruits and vegetables

Support for recycling and composting efforts doesn't really require additional resources—it's more a matter of thinking differently about what we do. To dispose of waste in an environmentally friendly way, we:

- Provide “Green Rooms” in each neighborhood that supply all-purpose recycling, trash/garbage, composting, and deposit-can containers. Composting and recycling bins are also available in public spaces.
- Donate appliances, cupboards, lighting fixtures and more from apartment and cottage renovations to the non-profit Habitat for Humanity and its ReStore supply store.
- Give each new resident a welcome basket that includes instructions on waste disposal, a compost bucket and a jar of Wake Robin honey.
- Use compostable containers for dining services takeout.
- Maintain an internal classified board, created by Human Resources, where employees and staff can post items to sell or give away.

We also educate residents about waste disposal practices (e.g., “Is this recyclable?”).

JAA: *Tell us more about how you educate residents about Wake Robin's green efforts.*

LP: At the weekly “Cup of Conversation” community meeting, we talk about a range of topics. As Director of Environmental Services, I get up regularly to talk about and to reinforce things related to environmental services. (Hearing something once isn't enough; you have to hear it multiple times.) We report about our green efforts once or twice a year as well, to let people know what we're doing, whether it's plans for the campus grounds or new practices we are employing.

Our Greens Committee also does educational presentations and fun skits. This very active resident committee recently gave a big presentation about waste disposal changes to the community meet-

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Director of Environmental Services Leslie Parker visits the Wake Robin sugarhouse, where residents gather and boil sap for maple syrup

ing—there are a lot of things that previously you could not recycle and now you can. To help the whole community learn what kind of refuse goes into which kind of container, the group had a skip [large waste container] and a table full of examples. I'll soon reinforce that presentation with a financial incentive approach: It costs us a lot less money to pay for recycling goods to be taken away or for composting than for solid waste disposal.

The more we talk about things as part of our news reports and our normal interactions with residents, the more people become aware of and participate in efforts. Questions and dialogue become easier, too.

NC: Environmental experts from some of our partner groups also give presentations to residents, as well as employees and the Board of Directors, about environmental issues and solutions. These presentations are very popular. Field trips are an additional avenue for education. Residents have made numerous trips to learn about issues, including visits to a water treatment plant and a solar energy farm, among others.

JAA: *How do you ensure staff are all on board and know what to do?*

NC: The Energy Use and Conservation Plan has helped to create a baseline of understanding among staff (and residents) that environmental stewardship is our norm. That is important. House-keeping staff are now wonderful cleaners who choose environmentally friendly products. Servers are informed each day about the contents of the food they take to tables and where it comes from. Staff know that products they order will—to the extent possible—be recyclable, compostable or environmentally friendly.

By spelling out Wake Robin's environmental focus and including it in the plans that guide our work, we ensure that environmental initiatives are "the way we do business."

LP: We incorporate environmental stewardship into everything we do. So instead of performance reviews, we have job talks where we focus on what we *can* do. We ask people what they need to help them do their jobs better or what will help them do their jobs in alignment with Wake Robin's core values. That makes it easier for staff to say, "Hey, I found this thing. What do you think?" They can then do research and figure out how to implement it.

Because it is important to keep abreast of new technologies, we send staff to trade shows and conferences and give them an opportunity to learn what else is out there. What's interesting is that as technology continues to change, we include staff in making those decisions. If you include staff, you have their buy-in, too. For example, when we went to ozone in laundry, we ensured everyone understood the thinking behind the decision—and staff embraced the idea. We apply the same approach through all our projects.

There is an opportunity for participation and coordination of efforts across the board.

JAA: *How have the board, staff and residents contributed to the Energy Use and Conservation Plan and the programs that support it?*

NC: As Leslie mentioned, ideas are generated communitywide, both by residents and staff. If logistically possible, they are enacted. Through its budget approval process, the board learns about and supports this work.

For example, residents initiated and maintain our beekeeping operation to support the health of the ecosystem. A resident contributed resources to create a wildflower garden in support. Honey is a wonderful by-product. There is also a current effort to expand our transportation sparked by the residents' interest in those options—and a staff desire to consolidate individual trips into one for the Wake Robin bus. Fewer individual trips will reduce our environmental impact. A side benefit will be to destigmatize the notion of residents discontinuing their driving, as this may now be an act of environmental awareness.

In another example, a commitment to teamwork supports Wake Robin's participation in the EnerNOC Demand Response program. As a member of EnerNOC's partner community and

participant in the energy-management program, we reduce our electricity use as a community during peak demand times to contribute savings to the energy grid. Staff and residents all take actions to support this program, which is a Wake Robin success story.

JAA: *Besides EnerNOC, what partnerships play a role in your environmental efforts?*

NC: There are a number of groups we work with to preserve Wake Robin's native bird, plant and wildlife habitats and to reduce our carbon footprint. These include wildlife biologists from the Audubon Society and Nature Conservancy, as well as experts from Efficiency Vermont, Casella Waste Management and Recycling, and a local forest-management firm.

Wake Robin's Energy Use and Conservation Plan: Three keys to success

1. The success of the Energy Use and Conservation Plan is based upon the idea that this is not an initiative—a list of tasks and activities—but the way of life at Wake Robin and the way we do business.
2. Another key to success is involving the whole community—residents (and their families), staff and board. We are open to ideas and proactively seek input.
3. Finally, because it's the way we do business, the budget must support the work. This may mean we have to wait to accomplish some things—which is one reason we also have a long-term capital improvement plan.

LP: We also work with Habitat for Humanity on a regular basis. Really, though, our biggest partnership is with our residents. Environmental stewardship and conservation is important to them—they support it, and they are an active part of it.

JAA: *How would you characterize the benefits of Wake Robin's environmental stewardship from a business perspective?*

NC: Day-to-day “green practices” are becoming more the norm—and not only in Vermont. Prospective residents don't want to “check their values at the door,” and they look to move to places that support their green priorities. Ignoring this reality would be detrimental to Wake Robin in our market.

Our community's environmental efforts have produced some unexpected opportunities—for example, we attracted attention from the *New York Times* and from local media. Also, residents have inquired from as far away as Hawaii! Today, Wake Robin is 98% occupied.

LP: With the way technology is changing, there are a lot of financial incentives, too, for being “green.” Financial opportunities are available both for people who come up with creative environmental ideas and for those who employ these new practices and technologies.

JAA: *Finally, how would you describe the overall impact of the Wake Robin plan?*

LP: While data support the success of the Energy Use and Conservation Plan, the real success can be summarized in five words: board, staff and resident commitment. Education, teamwork and sharing information are at the foundation of being a green community. Our community works as a whole to continually impact our environment in positive ways. This commitment makes our earth-friendly practices possible and ensures continued success in our efforts to conserve, preserve and sustain a healthy community. 🌿



As a field trip, Wake Robin residents have visited a solar energy farm

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Wake Robin's Nancy Chiquoine and Leslie Parker for their help with this article. For more information about the community, visit <https://www.wakerobin.com>.

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Images courtesy of Wake Robin