

## And Away We Go

### Why the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado?

Imagine that we're all on an ecological bus travelling 50 miles an hour and there's a cliff ahead. If you're looking out the side windows, the scenery can be pleasing. But if you're looking ahead out the front window, you know that because of its momentum, everyone on the bus is going to have to pull together to change direction and avoid going over the edge. It doesn't matter if you're sitting in the front seats, middle seats, or back seats economically; we're all going wherever the bus goes.

The Alliance for Sustainable Colorado (**the Alliance**) was conceived to engage and facilitate sectors of society to work together to address the mounting threats to the habitability of the planet. The mission of the Alliance is to advance sustainability through building collaboration among nonprofits, business, government and education. We need the idealism of nonprofits and practicality of business combined in the policies of government to create truly effective solutions, which we must teach our children.

“All definitions of sustainability involve: living within limits; understanding the interconnections among economy, society, and environment, and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.”  
~ Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

The Alliance is committed to the development of policies and implementation of practices of sustainability which:

- protect and preserve the integrity of biological and natural systems that make life possible;
- respect the natural environment and the limits of the planet's finite resources;
- ensure that everyone has access to adequate food, housing, healthcare, education and jobs;
- protect and promote the civil rights of all Coloradans; and
- assess decisions in terms of financial profitability, environmental quality and human well-being, the triple bottom line.

*The Alliance provides an unparalleled opportunity for nonprofits, businesses and elected officials to interact on a daily basis about the issues that matter to us all. None of us can go it alone, and the Alliance makes links among diverse interests and the connections we need to build a sustainable future for Colorado.*

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper

### History

In 1990 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, John Powers met with members of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center at the time their organization was having to relocate. The Center had been sharing a building with another nonprofit, Project Lighthawk, but the building was sold and they were required to move. John asked if the two had found value in being located together, and heard a resounding “Yes!” The ability to work in proximity was felt to have enormously increased their respective and combined effectiveness. John asked if co-locating with other organizations would likely multiply the benefits and again heard “Yes!” Small nonprofits in Santa Fe were overwhelmed by federal, state and commercial interests. At that time, New Mexico's economy was similar to those of developing nations, largely at the mercy of forces over which it had little control. Government spending, particularly at its nuclear facilities at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, Sandia Military Base and the White Sands Missile Range, accounted for nearly one-fourth of the state's economy. Small nonprofits held little power and were easily disregarded in decisions affecting the people of the state. John imagined that banded together – *in the state capital* – the organizations would be more powerful and have more permanency, stature, credibility, and respect. They would be taken more seriously.

After several meetings with nonprofit representatives to explore creating the “New Mexico Environmental Center”, surveys were sent to a range of nonprofits about their current offices and wishes for amenities in new offices. The number of square feet and preferences were tallied and a concept paper was drafted. Several hurdles were identified:

- what would the ownership structure of the Center be
- how would it be paid for
- who would manage the building
- who and how would tenants be invited to participate
- which organizations would actually move in
- how would the building be filled in a short time to begin receiving sufficient revenues to make the project succeed financially

The project didn’t get off the ground. John lived in Rifle, Colorado. He was the driving force behind the idea and was travelling to Santa Fe to gauge and gin up interest in a center. The local groups were deeply concerned about immediate problems, “fighting fires”, and not having expertise in real estate, didn’t see that they could divert time or resources to develop a center. Lessons were learned: the hurdles listed above would have to be cleared, particularly the ownership and management structure would have to be defined, and a sufficient base of tenants would have to be assured, or such a center wouldn’t be financially feasible. Though holding dear both the value and the potential synergies of nonprofit organizations sharing a building, John shelved the idea.

Wanting to promote collaboration, in 1996 John joined the board of the nonprofit Colorado Environmental Coalition. In 1998, when The Coalition was looking to relocate, John Hickenlooper offered space at 1536 Wynkoop Street in Lower Downtown Denver, alongside the headquarters of his Wynkoop Brewing Company. Hickenlooper, along with Joyce Meskis, owner of the Tattered Cover Bookstores, owned the building, a 100-year old warehouse, and adjoining lot. In early 2003, Powers worked with four nonprofits and Joyce for them to lease offices in the building, and with four more at the end of 2003. He was accumulating a nucleus of tenants to see if a nonprofit center in Denver – *Colorado’s capital* – could be realized, this time in his home state.

When Joyce put the building up for sale in February 2004, she offered it to Powers, whom she knew was interested in creating a nonprofit center. John quickly filed an application with the IRS to create a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado, which would own the building, and then signed a purchase contract. The IRS application was approved on June 17, and the brand new Alliance for Sustainable Colorado took title to the property on June 30. The Alliance Center was born.

### **Mission Driven**

The Alliance was incorporated with programs in policy, education and outreach, and demonstration: the Alliance Center. These programs are the Alliance’s tools to build a statewide sustainability network. The Alliance Center was conceived to enable synergies among the nonprofit tenants and non-tenant partners, and create a physical and intellectual hub for the network. Tenants are selected by their missions and potential for contributing to mutual benefit in a building modeling sustainable practices. Donors often say that there are too many nonprofits with too much overlap of work, too little coordination, and not enough efficiency. By co-locating, the Center saves nonprofits costs, creates synergies, increases their efficiency and effectiveness, and creates a bigger bang for donors’ bucks. Contributions to the Alliance support not only the work of the 30+ tenants in the Alliance Center, donations also support their work with their non-tenant partners. Non-tenants are welcome and encouraged to use the five conference rooms and many meeting spaces in the Center, which is intended to be a community asset and resource.

## **Multi-Tenant Nonprofit Center**

The Alliance Center is a Multi-Tenant Nonprofit Center, a concept developed by the Nonprofit Centers Network, and a member of the network. The network is an invaluable resource for anyone exploring creating an MTNC and for those operating them. Following are excerpts from the NCN website [www.nonprofitcenters.org](http://www.nonprofitcenters.org):

Multi-tenant Nonprofit Centers (MTNCs) are buildings that house multiple organizations and provide healthy, efficient, quality, mission-enhancing workspace. More than just offices, these facilities can become sustainable centers of strength for communities to dream, work, and grow together. MTNCs come in all shapes and sizes and serve many different kinds of communities. All centers, however, share three basic features:

- Composed of multiple (2 or more), primarily not-for-profit, tenant organizations
- Exist as a physical site (one or more buildings)
- Provide affordable, stable workspace, build capacity for the nonprofit sector, and support the various missions of its tenant organizations.

### Why is Space Important to the Nonprofit Sector?

The ability of nonprofits to provide quality affordable social services depends on their ability to develop and maintain crucial infrastructure resources. More than ever, nonprofit organizations find it increasingly difficult to secure and maintain quality workspace that is stable and affordable and also enhances the mission and operations of tenant organizations. Some of the key reasons for this include...Economic Hard Times ... Lack of Real Estate Focused Support Services and Advocates – There are very few, if any, organizations dedicated explicitly to the office and program space needs of the nonprofit sector.

The Alliance Center, though just one of the program areas of the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado, is the most resource intensive and visible. While the Center requires capital, effort, time, attention and expertise, it produces returns on these investments that help achieve the Alliance's mission of advancing sustainability through collaboration, and it assists numerous nonprofits more efficiently and effectively achieve theirs. Together we're better.

## **Shared Benefits of Co-Location**

The Center now houses over 30 nonprofits, offering them stability and financial security of reduced occupancy costs due to full service leases (operating costs, utilities, taxes and insurance paid by the Alliance) and below market rents. Further, tenants benefit from such lower cost and higher quality shared services as a building-wide phone system, high speed Internet access, and photocopier, which they could not afford individually, but can collectively. Also, tenants in the Alliance Center are frequently offered donations of furniture, office supplies, bulk buying opportunities, tickets to events and a variety of monetary benefits because they work together in one place. Other meaningful benefits are the availability of facilities like the lunch room; equipment like LCD projectors, screen, speaker phone and hand trucks; tools; plates, silverware and glasses – all provided by the Alliance. Tenants even borrow from each other, utilize each others' advanced technology like the Center for Native Ecosystems' huge printer that produces GIS maps, posters, and high quality photographs. They share each others' skills like the two information technology specialists on the staff of the Colorado Environmental Coalition. And above all, they share each others' expertise on the range of issues that the many tenants (and their partners) address.

## **Synergies – When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts**

While there are many instances of synergies known only to the partners, three notable examples with high visibility are the 2007 passage of Senate Bill 07-051 “Concerning A Requirement For Increased Resource Efficiency For State-Assisted Buildings”, 2008 Alliance Big Tent, and 2009

passage of 45 bills supported by Alliance Center tenants and their non-tenant partners.

SB-07-051 - One of the Alliance's projects, the Colorado Sustainable Business Network, hosted its first legislative briefing in the capitol in 2005. From that meeting, Senate Majority Leader, Ken Gordon, sponsored a bill to require new construction of more than 5,000 square feet receiving more than 25% of its funding from the state to be resource efficient. The Building Colorado Coalition was formed by the Alliance to advocate for passage of this bill. Nonprofit lobbyists counseled green building industry experts on how to testify at committee hearings. Fred Andreas, a professor and practicing architect, brought a class of his graduate architectural students to testify. Together nonprofits representatives, business professionals and academics worked to enlist co-sponsors and persuade other elected representatives to support the bill. After working together for over two years, the Building Colorado Coalition was delighted when SB-07-051 was signed into law in 2007. Now, state supported construction must now achieve the highly resource efficient US Green Building Council LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certification.

Alliance Big Tent - During the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Center tenants collaborated on the Alliance Big Tent. ProgressNow conceived the innovative idea to erect a two-story, 8,000 square foot temporary structure to host bloggers on the first level and nationally known speakers on the second in the lot adjoining the Center. The Alliance implemented the vision. Tenants in the Center secured over 160 nationally known speakers including T. Boone Pickens; Nobel Laureate, Paul Krugman; JFK advisor, Ted Sorensen; Dan Rather; Arianna Huffington; Robert Kennedy, jr.; Rachel Maddow; and Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google. Dozens of federal and state elected representatives, Governors, Senators, and Congresspeople, came to the Alliance Big Tent to discuss political problems and solutions with each other, the audiences and bloggers. Katie Couric and the Good Morning America Show broadcast the event. Only because of the Alliance Center and tenants' willingness to work together was this groundbreaking \$585,000 project made possible.

In 2009, 45 bills addressing some aspect of sustainability supported by Alliance Center tenants and their non-tenant partners were signed into law. Governor Ritter signed three of them at the Alliance Center. Bill sponsors participated along with Center tenants, and the event was filmed by television stations and reported in the media. Concentrating nonprofits at one location gives them more clout.



### **Investing in Green**

The Alliance renovated the historic warehouse that became the Alliance Center and earned two US Green Building Council LEED certifications: **Existing Building Gold** and **Commercial Interiors Silver**, as well as US EPA Energy Star *Leader* status. (The Colorado Chapter of USGBC is a tenant in the Alliance Center.) In the cases when additional money is spent for green features (often wise choices don't cost more for green substitutes), they produce positive returns in cost savings and greater productivity. Expenditures in green features should be considered investments that provide returns, not just costs.

The Alliance chose to earn multiple green building certifications for two reasons. Making existing building stock more energy, water and materials efficient is one of the most cost effective ways to reduce green house gas emissions. However, the most important aspect of this nonprofit center is the collaborative environment and shared resources that help groups leverage each others' work and

provide a model for activists in other states interested in building their own statewide sustainability networks. By making the Center a showcase of sustainable construction, visitors are attracted to learn about and emulate the green features in their own buildings, and they experience collaboration in action. While touring the Center, they are exposed to the tenants and their work.

Green Building Education – The Alliance offers guided, self-guided and virtual tours (<http://www.sustainablecolorado.org/center/tour.php>) of the Center's green features. Signs have been posted throughout the building. The Center has been awarded the Governor's Office of Energy Management and Conservation Colorado Energy Champion, and US Green Building Council National Leadership Award for Education by an Organization in 2006; the Mayor of Denver Design Award: It Ain't Easy Being Green in 2007; and Wirth Chair Pioneer of the New Energy Economy, and Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment Environmental Leader Gold Award in 2008. Like the multiple green building certifications, these awards draw people and media to the building and attention to the collaboration it fosters.

### **Keys to Success of the Alliance Center**

Ownership Structure – The most fundamental issue in creating a nonprofit center is its ownership structure. The title of the Center is held by the Alliance Center LLC, which affords liability protection. The LLC is wholly owned by the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado. There is a single entity owner, which can make quick decisions consistent with its mission, unlike a co-op or condominium association. While financial help to enable the purchase of the building could have come from the sale of units or shares, the mission of the Alliance would have been diluted and could have waivered with shared ownership. With multiple owners, careful selection of the mix of tenants can be lost. With one owner, all occupants of the building are on equal footing and can be obliged to follow a common set of principles and encouraged to collaborate.

Location - This healthy office space is near public transportation, 18 blocks from the state capitol and the Denver City and County building.

Financing – Because the Alliance Center is owned by a nonprofit for nonprofit tenants, the Alliance has secured a tax exempt loan based on a municipal bond with a 4.5% interest rate, 25 year amortization, and 10-year term. The Center also qualifies for real property tax exemption.

Fundraising - Donors to the Alliance keep it financially stable, which in turn enables the Alliance to make tenants more secure and stable. In several instances, tenants have received contributions and grants due to referrals from other tenants or visitors to the Center.

Clear Purpose – Because the Alliance Center is mission driven, it provides a base for resident organizations and a core for a growing statewide sustainability network which others can join.

Green Building Tours – Tenants of the Center are accustomed to tours through their offices to see green features and learn about their work. Tours increase exposure and open doors to interaction.

Dog Friendly – By making the Center dog friendly, when dogs are present, they stimulate interaction among tenants and with visitors. Conversations are eased, which enable relationships and pave the way for collaboration. People have more fun and morale is increased.

All are welcome to come to the Alliance Center in person and at: [www.sustainablecolorado.org](http://www.sustainablecolorado.org)

*When Spider Webs Unite, They Can Tie Up A Lion ~ Ethiopian Proverb*