

Start-up Businesses for the Environment

By David Goldstein, VCPWA, IWMD

Glenn Hening, founder of the non-profit Surfrider Foundation, has started a for-profit business he expects will also benefit the environment. The company, currently based at his home in Oxnard, is called Granular Resistance Fitness Corporation.

Before deciding to go into business, Hening extensively researched the fitness industry, produced prototypes, and received testimonials from people who tried and liked his invention. He also made sure his project was good for the environment before obtaining seed capital from investors. "The environment is in crisis," he said. "Any new business that is not making a positive difference should not even start."

Hening's fitness equipment uses recycled plastic in the form of spherical beads, providing resistance within a natural range-of-motion. "For people who are tired of pumping iron in gyms," Hening said, "our equipment offers real world range-of-motion exercise. We think this could be the next big thing in fitness." The equipment will also help people train for surfing, ocean swimming, and outrigger canoe paddling, which Hening hopes will lead to increased participation in those ocean sports. "The more people are in the ocean, the more they will appreciate Nature and hopefully think about ways they can help protect the environment."

Sensor Industries is another local start-up aimed at improving the environment. Based in Camarillo, they make sensors capable of detecting toilet leaks or indoor water floods. According to David Duckwitz, the company's new Chief Executive Officer, approximately 20 percent of indoor water usage is from toilets leaking from the tank into the bowl, resulting in occasional "phantom flushes." The company's toilet leak and flood sensors send text message and email alerts to monitors who then take actions to prevent ongoing water waste or indoor water damage.

Leaky toilets with old flappers can also be detected if residents place dye in the tank and wait to see if it ends up in the bowl without flushing. However, Sensor Industry's devices are more commonly used in commercial toilets without accessible tanks, apartments, schools, and at other locations where people using bathrooms are not motivated to closely monitor leaks, such as where water is not billed directly to bathroom users.

Duckwitz says Sensor Industries is "a purpose-driven Company with very passionate employees who want to make a difference in water conservation." The company has so far installed over 5,000 sensors and recently signed a contract with the city of Oxnard's Housing Authority for installation of sensors in homes through a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program, reimbursed by the Metropolitan Water District.

Antonio Mejia, of Simi Valley, is also working on a start-up business. He will soon attend a precertification class required by the California Department of Resources Recycling and

Recovery (CalRecycle) for entrepreneurs interested in starting recycling centers. Mejia is focusing on ways he can comply with the regulatory requirements for a mobile buyback operation he says will “cater to customers that don’t have time or willingness to drop off at a local recycling center.” The class offered by CalRecycle is an example of public sector assistance to start-up businesses. Such assistance is especially crucial in an industry, like bottle and can buyback centers, dependent on close cooperation with a government.

Local assistance to businesses is also available through the Economic Development Collaborative of Ventura County, which administers the local chapter of the Small Business Development Center. In addition to facilitating Small Business Administration Loans and helping with other paths to financing, the non-profit assists with business plan development and access to incentive and assistance programs. For companies making products with recycled material, the collaborative refers entrepreneurs to the Ventura County Recycling Market Development Zone, which assists with permits, site selection, obtaining materials, marketing, and a finance program lending at a four percent fixed rate for up to 15 years.

The collaborative also refers businesses to the Service Corps of Retired Executives. SCORE matches business owners with mentors who are retired executives, willing to provide the benefit of their experience. SCORE is a non-profit sponsored by the U.S. Small Business Administration, operating since 1964.

Another helpful local resource is Ventura County’s Workforce Development Division. This agency funds employee training opportunities and administers a program repaying employers for up to half the salaries of new employees during those employees’ training period.

Local start-ups can also benefit from co-working space, including through the Ventura Ventures business incubator, local chambers of commerce, and a Bio and Technology incubator in Thousand Oaks. In Camarillo, the Pharos Center for Innovation charges low fees for co-work and meeting space, a recording room, mentor assistance, and a demo day. The center administers an annual Start-up Weekend competition, with cash and in-kind prizes for start-up companies with top pitches for their business.

Matter Labs, based in Camarillo, is involved in many aspects of assistance to local start-up companies. For example, Matter Labs assists the U.S. Navy and the Port of Hueneme with development of a maker space devoted to rapid prototyping by start-up companies. At www.fathomwerx.com, the Navy describes its start-up assistance space as “60,000 square feet of awesomeness” geared toward “nontraditional (Department of Defense) partners” whom the Navy hopes will help them address “challenging problems.” Erick Went, one of the owners of Matter Labs, says the space offers a CNC mini-mill, laths, environmental testing equipment, and laser cutter. The Navy provides equipment, the Port provides the space, and the Economic Development Collaborative and Matter Lab provide staff, with some grant funding.

Went is also one of the hosts of Techstars Startup Weekend at in Port Hueneme, July 26 to 28. For an entry price ranging from \$75 to \$99, entrepreneurs receive educational presentations by industry leaders, collaboration on brainstorming for business development, and assistance with basic prototype creation. Tickets for just the presentations at the culminating event on Sunday night are \$25, at <http://startupweekendvc.com> .