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Employee owned, sustainable businesses could come to Akron

Written by [Chris Miller](#)



The Evergreen Cooperative Laundry in Cleveland is an example of an employee-owned business that gives wealth directly back to the community, along with conducting green business practices.

Evergreen Cooperative in Cleveland has placed community wealth squarely into the hands of some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, while operating businesses with minimal impact on the environment. Its employees own a stake in the companies they work for and have an active role in managing the businesses, which to date are a laundry service, a solar energy company and an urban greenhouse.

This model of employee ownership and community wealth-building could soon take shape in Akron as some of the minds behind this Cleveland cooperative look to launch similar models in local neighborhoods. The question is: Who will lead the charge?

“As a worker-owner (of the laundry co-op), you will have accrued after eight years, \$65,000 as your share of the profits as an owner,” said Jim Anderson, a project manager with the Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, who shared the benefits of this business model with the Greater Akron Innovation Network for Sustainability's (GAINS) recent monthly meeting. “That is community wealth-building. It isn't just about a payroll or a job.”

Anderson is senior program coordinator with the Ohio Employee Ownership Center, a nonprofit outreach center at Kent State University that supports business development across the state.

Evergreen comprises three for-profit businesses in the Cleveland area: a laundry service, an alternative energy company that installs solar panels and a hydroponic urban greenhouse that sources fresh local food. The businesses sprung up from a feasibility study funded by the

Cleveland Foundation and conducted by Kent State University's Ohio Employee Ownership Center.

Each laundry cooperative employee makes approximately \$26,000 a year, along with receiving health benefits at no cost. "The whole initiative was to minimize turnover at the Evergreen laundry facility and other Evergreen companies as well," said Anderson.

After a six-month probationary period, the worker may become a cooperative member, said Anderson. Employees may then buy a stake in the company, which is deducted from their hourly pay over the course of three years.

And even setbacks like criminal records are not a barrier to employment, said Anderson. "At Evergreen laundry, if you have a felony record, that is not a barrier to being hired. It is not a problem."

The notion of community wealth-building takes away from the top-heavy corporate management structure in favor of employees owning a significant stake in the company, and money going directly back into the communities that need it the most. In Cleveland's University Circle area, some of the richest nonprofits and businesses are encircled by some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, a focus of Evergreen Cooperative.

The Evergreen Cooperative Laundry put people in this disadvantaged neighborhood to work by looking to the anchor institutions in town (in Cleveland's case, the medical businesses like hospitals and nursing facilities).

The companies also practice a "triple bottom line" philosophy that focuses on "people, prosperity and planet," and they consider green business practices and environmental protection as important as profits.

"Every decision we made was a focus on green initiatives," said Anderson.

To learn more about this model, the Ohio Employee Ownership Center is hosting a conference April 19 at the Hilton in Fairlawn. Visit oeockent.org for details.

For more information about GAINS, visit the group on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GAIN4Sustainability. To find out more about Evergreen Cooperative, visit evergreencooperatives.com.

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