

Taking strides to go green

Run organizers implement more environmentally friendly features

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To keep its participants hydrated, the Freihofer's Run for Women hands out more than 10,000 bottles of water. But water, the 5-kilometer race's greatest necessity, comes in plastic that's not so friendly to the environment.

Starting this year, the Freihofer's wants to go greener.

Beginning with Saturday's 30th annual running of the race in downtown Albany, organizers plan to experiment with ways to reduce their carbon footprint. A full-blown greening plan might come as soon as next year's race.

The upcoming Freihofer's will include two portable drinking fountains at the starting line. If racers take to the fountains this year, they might return in mass numbers at the next race, allowing the Freihofer's to order fewer water bottles.

Other future changes could include Internet-only registration -- to eliminate the need for paper mailings -- and recyclable or environment-conscious cups and packaging for refreshments.

"Races are starting to be very aware of the environment," Freihofer's race director George Regan said. "In terms of a formal program, we're just starting to weigh the pros and cons."

Freihofer's is one of many events around the country turning greener. As part of an initiative by Runner's World magazine called "The Green Team," many races, from 5-kilometer races like Freihofer's to marathons, are finding ways to cut back on energy consumption and waste.

The Austin Marathon and Half Marathon, for instance, organized a massive recycling effort that collected more than 14,000 pounds of recyclables, or more than twice as much garbage as the average family produces in a year.

Organizers in Austin also reduced their need for energy by using solar power for their main stage, where a band played and the race announcer gave commentary. A fleet of volunteers in kayaks kept rivers near the course clear of debris.

"More and more people are pushing toward doing things greener," said Michelle Sandquist, who oversaw the event's greening efforts. "Companies are coming up with greener products. It's worthwhile for us to do our part."

The Freihofer's already initiated some efforts to cut back on trash. Organizers plan to place 40 more marked recycling bins along this year's route. And Regan said he requested that water bottles and other products ship with minimal packaging.

Just placing the 10,000 water bottles in recycling pails -- to ensure they don't end up in landfills -- can be the equivalent of keeping about 35 cars off the road for an entire year, said Mary Ellen Mallia, the University at Albany's director of environmental sustainability.

"That would be very good," Mallia said. "Recycled water bottles -- the small ones -- are high-quality recyclables."

Still, cutting back on the sheer volume of materials needed remains the race's greatest challenge. A single bottle of water can take up to half a barrel of oil to produce, making reducing reliance on the bottles the best greening strategy.

The Freihofer's also uses almost 600 plastic water jugs and more than 15,000 waxed paper cups. The waxed paper cups can't be recycled and aren't biodegradable, Mallia said.

The Freihofer's hopes the portable drinking fountains can shave the numbers. The product, distributed by Outdoor Boss, allows runners to drink water from several nozzles sprouting from a large water jug.

The Hartford Marathon and Half Marathon used a large-scale portable drinking system for its most recent event. The 2,000-gallon "bubbler" pumped water through a long pipe and allowed runners to drink from fountains. The device not only garnered positive reviews from participants but also saved 10,000 water bottles.

"We never had a backup, and there was no mess or trash," race director Beth Shluger said.

If Freihofer's runners offer similar feedback, the Freihofer's might include as many as 50 smaller portable fountains next year, with a team of volunteers ready to refill them whenever they empty.

"We'll have to see how it goes," Regan said. "You have to do what's right for the event and what's right for the environment."

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a glanceWhat: Freihofer's Run for WomenWhen: 9:15 a.m. SaturdayWhere: Empire State Plaza On timesunion.com: Racewalker Pamela Allie-Morrill demonstrates the sport. week: The Times Union will have a story on the race every day and special sections Saturday and Sunday.

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