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BUSINESS
ALTERNATIVE ENERGY

New businesses powered by environmental worries

By Jennifer Tramm

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Spiraling energy prices and environmental concerns are driving local interest in renewable energy — and spawning some new local businesses.

Earlier this month, some 2,000 people visited Solar Rock, a daylong solar-powered rock concert and "green fair" at Himmel Park. The event was part of Step It Up 2007, a series of nationwide events to raise awareness of renewables and climate change.

Attendee Thurman Todd Miller said he moved to Tucson recently from Chicago specifically to get into the business of solar home installations.

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home without charging an installation fee, Scott said.

Customers start out paying the same rate per kilowatt-hour as they do now to Tucson Electric Power Co., he said. Depending on the customer's contract, that price could be locked in for as long as 25 years, even if TEP's prices go up.

Scott said he found the supplier for his business while looking online for a solar system for his own home.

"It makes it affordable to every home," he added.

Renewable technologies at the fair included possible replacements for fossil fuels.

Jim Lombard started Roadrunner Biodiesel in November and has seen business increase ever since.

Although Lombard says it is too early to tell whether the uptick in business is due to rising gasoline and other energy prices, he says he has noticed at least one trend.

"When petroleum diesel is more expensive, more biodiesel is sold," he said.

Biodiesel, made from vegetable oil, can be used in most diesel vehicles and is priced competitively with regular diesel.

Biodiesel can be purchased in two locations in Tucson: Go Go Mart, 2200 E. Broadway, supplied by Roadrunner Biodiesel; and Arizona Petroleum Products, 1015 S. Cherry Ave.

Meanwhile, interest is growing in photovoltaics at the utility level.

TEP offers customers two programs to support photovoltaics, in large part due to a state mandate that regulated utilities produce an increasing amount of their power from renewable sources.

The Arizona Corporation Commission approved new rules in November for the state's

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At a solar-powered rock concert and "green fair" at Himmel Park, Marie Wright checks out a solar oven. The fair featured an array of possible replacements for fossil fuels and spotlighted some new local businesses that are helping consumers go green.

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electric utility companies that mandate that 15 percent of all of the energy they sell come from renewable resources by 2025.

The renewables programs are funded in part by surcharges on electric bills.

A recent poll suggests most consumers don't mind paying a little more.

The poll, conducted in February by the research firm Public Opinion Strategies, found that 89 percent of surveyed Arizonans are willing to pay more to ensure that the state's energy is moving toward greater usage of renewable resources, such as solar and wind power. The February poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

As part of its renewables program, TEP operates one of the world's biggest grid-connected photovoltaic systems, a 4.6-megawatt photovoltaic array adjacent to its coal-fired Springerville Generating Station in Eastern Arizona.

"We operate the most productive single-site photovoltaic system in the Western Hemisphere," said TEP spokesman Art McDonald.

Closer to home, TEP's GreenWatts program allows customers to add a few dollars to their monthly bills to fund photovoltaics projects at schools and other community facilities.

Additionally, the company's SunShare program offers rebates to customers who install solar energy systems on their homes or businesses. The rebates help offset the often high cost of the systems.

A business owner could receive TEP rebates of up to \$2,500 per DC kilowatt, according to program details. Such a nonresidential SunShare participant could get a maximum rebate of \$250,000.

"It certainly is a popular program," McDonald said. At the end of 2005, SunShare had 174 combined residential and business-program participants, but by the end of 2006, that number nearly had doubled to 324.

In addition to the rebates offered by TEP, state and federal tax incentives are available to both individuals and businesses.

One of TEP's SunShare customers, Dale Keyes said he saves about \$50 on his monthly electric bills since he joined the program and installed his solar system in July.

Keyes said the process included evaluating his home for the proper roof orientation, filling out the application forms and waiting for the silicon, in high demand worldwide, to become available.

Keyes said he and his wife have always been environmentally conscious, but he added that if energy prices were not as high, they would not have been as motivated to install their system.

The cost of his 2-kilowatt system, including upfront costs to TEP, which bought the solar panels and then sold them to Keyes at a discount, was \$10,400.

The retail cost of such a system is about \$27,000, said Brandie Kiracofe, sales associate for The Solar Store, a major sponsor for the solar event.

Kiracofe said the store has seen an increased interest in solar systems since the rise in energy prices and the release of the documentary "An Inconvenient Truth," detailing the threat of global climate change.

"We got quite a few people who put systems on their houses because of that movie," she said.

• *Jennifer Tramm is a University of Arizona student who is apprenticing at the Star. Contact her at 573-4181 or starapprentice@azstarnet.com.*



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