

May 17, 2009

Valley could be a crucible for green industry

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The Desert Sun

The Coachella Valley could become the cradle of the world's greatest asset — clean energy.

With its 350 days of sunshine, and its existing base of renewable energy sources such as geothermal and wind, the valley is in prime position to secure a foothold in the clean energy sector.

It's already becoming fertile ground for green industry businesses bent on creating green-collar jobs.

"It's kind of like a perfect storm in a lot of respects," said Kay Hazen, a valley consultant who is working with Carolyn Stark at University of California, Riverside's Palm Desert Graduate Center to help develop an economic blueprint for the valley.

Still a work in progress, it is being shaped by Market Street Services Inc. through a consortium of business, government and local leaders.

The Southwest has been described as the mother lode of clean power. More than 300 solar firms have already sprouted in the six-county region of Southern California.

Driving them to the state is a horn of plenty — a potential to tap federal stimulus dollars and California state incentives to create hybrid enterprise zones and to build and retrofit homes and buildings of all kinds with renewable energy streams.

Customer rebates are being extended for using solar and wind energy and making overall energy-efficiency improvements.

"In a way, it feels like we're in the early stages of a dot.com boom," said Fred Bell, executive director of the California Building Industry Association's desert chapter.

But Richard Oliphant, a valley developer, remembers the dot.com days and acknowledges some similarities in energies to create a new economy, with key differences in the current turn of events.

"Competition will keep it lean," he said.

Oliphant also says this movement toward clean energy will make the region unique and diverse.

It holds the potential to be the most positive step the valley has taken in a very long time, he said.

Momentum building

For the Coachella Valley, the green economy represents the combination of renewable energy, clean tech and related green buildings, sustainability, environmental protection and all the things that circle that wagon.

The solar industry is gaining in momentum because of the solar farms and the rooftop programs.

With much of the stimulus cash aimed at energy-efficiency programs, Bell envisions 500 to 2,000 jobs carved out of that segment alone for workers idled by the housing bust who could be retrained to do millions of dollars worth of retrofit and rehab work across the nation.

Academics talk about the education programs that could be put in place to build a workforce that's well-trained and well-paid for startup companies with innovative minds.

Many companies have taken root here, or are expanding, because of the green movement.

Some are retooling.

RBF Consulting, a planning and engineering firm in Palm Desert, is branching into greenhouse gas analysis, as well as sustainability plans.

Huss LLC of Palm Desert, a global specialist in diesel particulate filter systems that moved from a 5,000-square-foot building into one four times larger because of expectations that it will help heavy-duty diesel vehicle and equipment owners retrofit their fleets to meet new air quality standards.

Huss has been held up as a prime example of what can happen to an existing business and its growth potential in the new, green economy. It plans to key in on \$300 million of the \$789 billion stimulus package for the Diesel Emissions Reduction Act administered by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Others have carved out a niche to market service on a "green" theme.

Smart Cremation, a new Rancho Mirage venture, talks about preserving the carbon footprint and sells cremation service with an environmental stream of consciousness: Donations will be made to the Arbor Day Foundation for reforestation. If wished, the Washington-based company will scatter cremated remains on public conservation land.

"There's no question that people are now looking at new business opportunities," Bell said.

The playing field will widen, particularly with the stimulus dollars that are likely to arrive here.

Hatch Partnership

One group of local professionals hoping to harness this energy is the Hatch Partnership, a nonprofit 501(c)3 venture to transform the Coachella Valley into a global arena for environmental technology, sustainability and conservation.

Scott Hines, a senior partner of the public advocacy firm Burke Rix Hines & Associates, said the Hatch Partnership's first program out of the gate is a business incubator.

"It's our belief that it is difficult to attract clean-tech workers to the valley when those jobs don't exist," he said.

"It's equally hard to bring mature, clean-tech companies to the valley when there's a lack of skilled labor

to work the jobs.”

It's a chicken-and-egg dilemma, he said.

“So it's our belief we have to grow our garden right here locally.”

Feeding is favorable government policy, a welcoming community for entrepreneurs, tax incentives, friendly banks, mentor network services and appealing concepts.

The premise behind forming the Hatch Partnership as a nonprofit was to foster an independent environment of collaboration, Hines said.

It is working with a west valley coalition and state officials on language and the prospect of creating Innovation Zones to nurture startup companies.

“The state wants to create zones for entrepreneurs and startups, like high-techs,” Hines said. “We want to narrow it more and make it clean tech.”

The partnership is also poised to:

Explore ways to harness the power of Palm Springs International Airport's Free Trade Zone with development of a Clean Tech Energy Expo Center.

“Right now, there is no Silicon Valley for clean tech,” he said, and so for venture capitalists, one may have to fly to spots all over the world to view the latest in emerging technologies. The Free Trade Zone would enable companies in these sectors to spend 90 days here, with fees waived, to create a crossroads for clean tech in the valley.

Build academic programs on renewable energy at the new west valley College of the Desert campus.

Develop an academic think-tank.

Create an environment, and occupy otherwise untapped commercial space, to support incubator companies.

One company in its scope plans to commercialize a technology that was discovered in the labs at UC Riverside: It has found a way to increase the lifespan of hydrogen fuel cells and make them significantly more affordable.

Foster partnerships between startups. Fuel cell technology, for instance, could be tapped by the wind industry. The cells could be used at the bottom of every windmill in the world to capture energy that is not sent to the grid.

Additional Facts

Green valley companies

Companies that have either taken root here, or are expanding because of the green movement, include:
Advanced Solar Electric, Thousand Oaks.
Akeena Solar Inc., the Los Gatos-based designer and installer of solar power systems.
Azlan Energy Solutions, Indio.
Cal Energy Generation, a MidAmerican Energy affiliate with 10 geothermal energy-generation facilities in California.

Chevron Energy Solutions, a unit of Chevron Corp., named by Fast Company magazine as one of the world's 50 most innovative companies.

Clear Edge Power, a Palm Desert firm with fuel-cell technology to convert natural gas, propane and eventually biofuels into electricity and heat.

Hyperseal Inc., a Thousand Palms company founded by a retired Air Force colonel that sells reflective and insulating paints and coating products that contain glass microspheres.

Tecta America Corp., a Chicago-based firm that offers green roof applications and has recently employed the former head of project finance in the United States for Germany-based Epuron. The European firm was involved in the solar panel installation at Augustine Casino in Coachella.

Gauging the color green

How do you know if the company you're dealing with is reputable? Check out their book of business, and the Web site, to justify their work.

Here are some questions to ask:

What are their credentials?

Do they have a contractor's license

Do they have references?

Can you inspect the work? Written materials about it?

Can you name references, and past contract work?

What warranties are offered?
