

Features

Local Alternative Energy Initiatives

JON ZEMKE | THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2008

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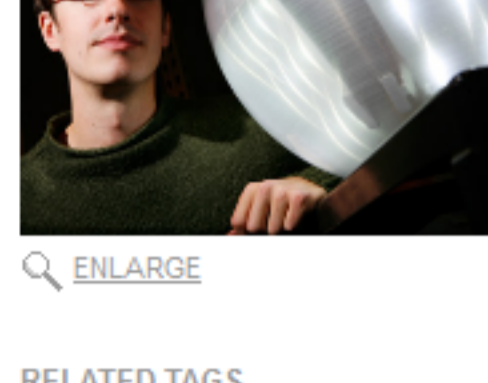
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Green is not a color that is usually associated with Metro Detroit. We identify colors like blue with workforce collars and local waterways. Red brings to mind Red Wings and apples. Gray paints pictures of Michigan skies and Rustbelt factories.

But green? In East Lansing, yes, but the chosen color of the environmentally conscious is largely absent when people think of southeast Michigan and the stereotypical images of Zug Island that come with it.

However, a number of grassroots movements in Metro Detroit are working to change things by establishing the holy trinity of alternative energy (solar, wind and efficiency) in their respective communities.

And, no we're not just talking about Ann Arbor, Michigan's golden child of environmentalism.

Wyandotte is preparing to build wind turbines along the Detroit River and installing solar panels on its schools. Ypsilanti is putting up solar panels, too, and testing out energy efficient LED streetlights. Ferndale is getting ready to install its own LED lights and working to turn its fleet of city cars more fuel efficient. County governments are performing energy audits on their buildings not only to save money but burnish their images as places working to stay ahead of the environmental curve.

"There is a real groundswell of support for these sorts of things," says Ed McArdle, conservation chair of the Sierra Club's Southeast Michigan Group. "There are a lot of communities doing it on their own."

Winds of change

Perhaps the biggest change of perception is taking place in Taylor. Long the punchline of what Metro Detroiters who threatened to add "tucky" to the end of its name, the community is now leaping ahead of neighboring cities in the alternative energy race.

That's right, downriver's poster child for 20th Century thinking is now planning to erect multi-million-dollar wind farms. As if that didn't cement their reputation, Taylor is one of the too few Metro Detroit cities to sign the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement and actively advocate against sprawl.

"I was a little skeptical of that because I had heard the wind wasn't so great away from the Great Lakes," McArdle says. "They said, 'Think of all of the wind that comes from Metro Airport.' Not to mention the price of wind energy is coming down and while the coal and nuclear power prices are going up."

And Taylor is not even at the forefront of developing wind technology in Metro Detroit. That position belongs to another prominent Downriver city, Wyandotte. Wayne County's second-oldest city is on track to become the first to actually build wind turbines, putting five up by 2010.

Wyandotte recently finished feasibility studies and is lining up federal funds to erect the \$15 million in wind turbines. Each 350-foot-tall structure (with 100-foot-long blades) is expected to produce enough electricity to power 500 homes. That's enough to satisfy the energy needs of nearly 20 percent of the occupied homes in Wyandotte.

While so many communities tend to fight wind-based projects, Wyandottians are pushing hard for it. City officials expect the windmills to not only help power their community and further push its image as a leader of progressive ideas, but they see as an opportunity to redefine the city's identity and even attract tourism dollars.

"They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder," says Melanie McCoy, general manager of Wyandotte Municipal Services. "A lot of people say these windmills are beautiful and majestic."

Solar spotlight

Wyandotte is not putting all of its alternative energy eggs into the wind basket, however. Wyandotte Municipal Services is working with the local public school district to install a \$100,000 solar system on Wilson Middle School, which is being put in by two local alternative energy start-up companies.

The idea behind alternative energy diversification is to help the city, which owns its own utility, be prepared to meet the state's proposed alternative energy portfolio standards (whenever Lansing gets it act together and actually passes one). City officials see the variety as the spice that will let local residents live the greenest lifestyle possible.

"The opportunities are here and you need to be able to nibble away at all of them," McCoy says. "That way you can see which ones are the most successful."

While solar may not have the energy potential in Michigan that wind does (big surprise), it's not stopping locals from taking matters into their own hands and giving it a spin.

A group of Ypsilanti residents are working to install solar panels on as many institutions with viable southern exposure. Solar panels are already up and functioning on the Ypsilanti Food Co-operative and there are plans to put up yet more on the back of city hall and the Rutherford Pool.

While these efforts are utilizing government grants for funding, they are also incorporating local fundraising efforts. In one case, collecting \$50 pledges via the Internet. Although the systems are expected to take years to pay for themselves, the idea is to make a statement on where their community's long-term priorities stand.

Dave Strenski, an Ypsilanti resident and admitted technology geek, is one of the everyday citizen-activists working to make the solar projects reality. Although he has a personal interest in solar gizmos, his advocacy goes beyond geekdom and is fueled by the belief that it's just the right thing to do. And what better way to get people to pay attention than putting a line of solar panels on one of city hall's most visible walls?

"There are a lot of people who get it and are doing things," Strenski says. "But there are a lot of people who don't get it and I think a demonstration system or something like city hall will send a message. It will be like a billboard for solar energy."

The cheapest power plant

Of course you can't talk about solar initiatives without mentioning Ann Arbor. The recently anointed Solar America City is not only working on sun-based energy projects for the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum and Farmer's Market but also creating incentives and education initiatives for more private solar projects.

However, the city isn't depending on creating new environmentally friendly ways to create clean energy. It's devoting a lot of its resources on energy conservation.

"We want to really emphasize efficiency," McArdle says. "The more efficiency you have the more alternative energy makes sense. Efficiency is the cheapest power plant in the world."

To accomplish this the city utilizes its energy office, which was birthed during the 1970s energy crisis. It puts forth the argument (convincingly) that city elders should make environmental issues a priority instead of a cheap headline.

"The bigger picture issue is we have an energy office," says Andrew Brix, spokesman for the Ann Arbor Energy Office. "We have a full-time staff here (two full-time and two part-time employees) working just on energy issues."

Among the solutions it has come up with are turning back on the electricity generators on the Huron River dams, ordering energy audits on city buildings, installing energy-efficient LED street lights downtown and buying hybrid buses. The city also set out an ambitious plan to have at least 20 percent of its electric needs satisfied by alternative energy sources by 2015.

The LED lights alone are expected to have some of the biggest savings. Although more expensive up front, they use half the energy of a regular light bulb and last four times as long on average. They are expected to pay for themselves within four years and start saving serious amounts of taxpayer dollars after that.

Wyandotte, Ypsilanti, Detroit and Ferndale are all considering the same thing, however, they are still studying the technology. Ferndale is closest to committing with plans to replace all 170 of its street lights with LEDs next year.

The little inner-ring suburb-that-could has also made strides to promote alternative suburb-and-energy efficiency to make years, most famously offering free passes on parking tickets to hybrid car owners. It's now looking to reform an old policy of using retired police patrol cars for city business.

These cars, often heavily built with hundreds of thousands of miles of wear and tear, get terrible gas mileage (sometimes measured in the single digits). City leaders want to buy more efficient replacements, pointing out how compact cars could triple fuel efficiency. Not a bad idea when gas is rapidly approaching \$4 a gallon.

"A lot of what we've been talking about impacts our everyday lives," says Robert Bruner, Ferndale's city manager. "It adds value to the taxpayer so it's really a no-brainer."

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Jon Zemke is the News Editor for both metromode and Concentrate. His last article for metromode was Ypsi's Wireless Co-op.

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Turbine installation - istock courtesy photo

Ed McArdle, conservation chair of the Sierra Club - Royal Oak's Transit Center

Dave Strenski, an Ypsilanti resident, with Ypsi food coop's solar panel's

Andrew Brix, spokesman for the Ann Arbor Energy Office, with LED street lamp - Ann Arbor

Photographs by Marvin Shaoumi

Marvin Shaoumi is the managing photographer for Metromode & Model D.

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