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Energy center exposes area to green technologies

By Chad Mearns
Our Town Editor

Growing up in rural Montana, Erik Foley was surrounded by nature every day. He quickly fell in love with the state's mountains, expansive plains and abundant wildlife. Then, he'd look at nature and see beauty. Now, he sees opportunity.

Specifically, he sees how the region's natural topography and landscape can be used to harness clean, pollutant-free energy, and as the director and co-founder of the Renewable Energy Center, located on the campus of St. Francis University in Loretto, it's his job to make sure others see it, too.

The center, established in 2005, was built to put area residents and businesses in touch with bias-free knowl-



Photo by Chad Mearns

Erik Foley shows off some wind turbine blades built at the Gamesa plant in Ebensburg.

edge and resources to learn how advances in renewable energy sources such as solar power, wind power and geothermal heat pumps can

be realistically put to use throughout the region.

"Previously, there was no one out there--particularly for the rural market--provid-

ing education or technical assistance programs to help people wrestle with all of these new energy sources," Foley said.

The center's role, Foley said, is simply to help its clients identify the most efficient options to meet their energy demands.

"If what's important to you is to save money, we'll help you do that. If what's important to somebody else is to reduce their carbon emissions and money is not as important, then we can help them do that."

In just two years of operations, the center has already made impressive strides in bringing more renewable energy sources to the area.

One of the center's major concentrations in the

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inside

"The Green Scene"



Students from Penn State are teaming up to design a solar-powered home for a national competition.

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Daily American's

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Energy center (continued from page 1)

Pennsylvania Wind Assessment Program, which allows landowners to test their wind resources and learn exactly how much power they can expect from a community-owned wind energy project on their land.

To date, the program has led to the erection of six assessment towers for projects in Erie, Cambria and Somerset Counties.

But according to Foley, finding new energy sources is less important than simply making more efficient use of the energy already available.

"The cheapest and cleanest energy source is actually the energy you don't use," he said.

But convincing the general public that a new approach to energy is both a necessary and achievable goal, Foley says, is no easy task.

"There's a lot of misperceptions about green buildings, energy efficiency and renewable energy."

For example, the myth that "green" buildings, which operate using environmentally friendly energy sources, are remarkably more expensive to build than their traditional counterparts, Foley said, is simply no longer true--especially if you factor in operating costs.

"They cost a heck of a lot less to operate," he said.

But beyond any purely environmental benefits, Foley says renewable energy sources make sense for strictly financial reasons as well.

According to Foley, roughly 60 to 80 percent of the \$30 billion Pennsylvania spends annually on energy goes to companies outside the state and the country.

"The idea is to plug this leaking bucket of all this money leaving the county, and how can, through energy efficiency and renewable energy, keep that money local and create jobs and at the same time clean the air," he said.

And although Pennsylvania is widely recognized as one of the nation's leaders in terms of clean energy, Foley says the need for more improvement is urgent.

"As long as you can hold your breath is about as long as you can not care about the environment," he said. "As soon as you start breathing, that's the environment," he said.

For more information and some surprising energy facts, visit our townonline.biz.

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