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Let's Begin Investing in Local Energy

By RICHARD BARR | The New Mexican

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Richard Barr

At a recent brainstorming session of the Santa Fe Independent Business Citizen Alliance, I brought up the subject of alternative energy. Someone in the room exclaimed "no, local energy!" That person was Mark Sardella of Local Energy. He explained that localizing the means of production and distribution would strengthen the local economy while providing greater control and sustainability.

Sardella, along with Charles Bensinger of Renewable Energy Partners, have provided me with the inspiration for today's column. At a time when many of us are feeling unempowered relative to national and global concerns, doing something here in the community can be a quicker, smarter and more satisfying ticket to the future you want to live in.

According to its mission statement, Local Energy seeks to restore energy self-reliance to communities nationwide in an effort to eliminate dependence on nonrenewable energy sources.

Using tax-deductible donations of money, materials and renewable fuels, Local Energy designs, promotes, finances and facilitates implementation of efficient heating, electrical and transportation systems in member communities.

It works exclusively with locally owned businesses to build energy systems that only use locally harvested energy sources such as solar, wind, waste and biomass. This strengthens local economies by keeping energy money recirculating within the community, and it also shields the community from the economic hardships of unstable fossil energy supplies.

Maximizing energy efficiency is its first priority, which means Local Energy's projects often reduce utility costs substantially. In such cases, a small portion of the savings is generally redirected back to Local Energy to fund more projects.

A strategic approach is used to ensure that the greatest extent of energy self-reliance is realized in each community served by Local Energy.

By initially focusing on areas that are cost-effective in the conventional sense, the savings generated by the early efforts are used to fund less cost-effective -- but equally essential -- measures later on. The typical order of implementation within a community is thus:

- Energy efficiency: Increasing insulation levels, upgrading lighting technology and replacing heating and cooling equipment with high-efficiency equipment.
- Thermal energy: Retrofitting electric and gas-fired heating systems with solar and biomass systems.
- Transportation: Replacing motor fuels with biofuels and improving public transport.
- Electricity: Interconnecting biofueled and wind generators to the electrical grid.

Local Energy is working on a Santa Fe proposal that will implement the conversion of biomass to energy. Rather than detail the proposal in this column, interested parties should contact Mark Sardella or, better yet, become a Local Energy member. Go to <http://www.localenergy.org> or call 820-2312.

On another front Charles Bensinger has succeeded in bringing cleaner fuel to Santa Fe. Solving the problem of pollution and the dangerous and costly national dependency on petroleum provides the impetus for Renewable Energy Partner's projects. To that end they have focused on bringing practical, affordable, and environmentally sensible biofuels to central and Northern New Mexico.

From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday, Renewable Energy Partners will open its first E85 Ethanol pump at the Amigo Phillips 66 station at 4354 Cerrillos Road between the Horseman's Haven restaurant and the Santa Fe Auto Park.

What's so great about E85?

E85 is 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline. It can be used in the tank of a "flexible-fuel" vehicle. Ford, Chrysler, GM, Mazda, Mercury and Mercedes produce more than 20 flexible-fuel models that can use E85 or regular unleaded gasoline.

E85 is a high-performance fuel and is made in New Mexico from "home-grown" Milo sorghum. It reduces our reliance on imported oil, reduces exhaust emissions and increases support for U.S.

farmers and biomass development.

You can learn about alternative fuels and alternative fuel vehicles by visiting the new station. Also on display will be a showcase of flexible-fuel vehicles by Santa Fe car dealers.

Many of you may be driving flexible-fuel vehicles and not even know it (see a list at REP's Web site).

While a second E85 facility will open closer to downtown later this year, REP continues to work on a biodiesel project that is a little different and just as exciting as E85.

Tests have demonstrated biodiesel's performance to be virtually the same as standard diesel. Biodiesel is commonly made from a wide variety of vegetable oils, animal fats and/or used cooking oils. It is readily biodegradable, nontoxic and sulfur-free.

This fuel quiets the engine, can eliminate black cloud emissions, reduces odor and dangerous particulates, and improves engine life. The most benefits are derived from using pure biodiesel (B100). Like ethanol, biodiesel is available in a variety of blends, with B20 (20 percent biodiesel, 80 percent petroleum diesel) the most common. B20 fuel is generally priced 5 cents to 20 cents more per gallon than regular diesel.

B100, or pure biodiesel, can be used anywhere standard diesel is used without vehicle modifications, except during cold weather. In cold weather, biodiesel thickens more than diesel fuel, and special heating systems are required.

You can use B20 or B35 biodiesel in any diesel engine, even in old engines with no retrofitting. However, plan to replace your fuel filter following the changeover because biodiesel will thoroughly clean your fuel system. Biodiesel will be available with E85 at a central Santa Fe location in the early fall.

Other REP initiatives include providing a biodiesel pilot tank to fuel school buses in Belen, encouraging The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque to switch its shuttle buses to biodiesel, and assisting Los Alamos National Laboratory and Bandelier National Monument to acquire biodiesel for use in heavy-equipment vehicles.

REP would like to expand its programs to additional cities, communities and fleets throughout New Mexico and the Southwest. To do so, it will need additional financial aid.

REP is a federally certified 501 (c)(3) public foundation. Any gifts and donations would be used to provide the public with clean, renewable alternatives to petroleum transportation fuels while creating local and regional employment opportunities and safeguarding public health.

Visit its Web site at [www](http://www.sfnewmexican.com).

RenewableEnergyPartners.org or call 989-4750.

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