

A look at alternative energy



By Stefanie Weiss / The Journal-Standard

Connie Sorn has organized an Alternative Energy Expo at Stephenson County Visitors Center. The expo will be on display at the center until Mar. 22, 2009.

By Jeff Montgomery
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Freeport, Ill. -

The Freeport/Stephenson County Visitors Bureau unveiled its Alternative Energy Expo Friday, Jan. 16, 2009, offering visitors a snapshot of the strides Stephenson County has made in the rapidly-growing industry.

Connie Sorn, Executive Director of the bureau, said that the emphasis on alternative energy reflects the importance of the budding industry — particularly in agriculturally-rich areas like Stephenson County.

“When you look at Stephenson County, with our agricultural base, we are sitting on a hotbed of potential,” Sorn said.

There are, indeed, many local examples of progress.

Freeport-based EcoEnergy is in the midst of constructing a 67-turbine wind farm northwest of Lena. To date, 35 of the turbines have been erected.

EcoEnergy is just one of many entities with displays at the expo, which will run until March 22, 2009. Skystream (which sells small-scale turbines), Lena-based Adkins Energy (which houses an ethanol-processing plant) and Highland Community College also have displays at the expo.

The theme of the new expo is simple: alternative energy is beginning to catch on.

It is a concept that local academic institutions have embraced.

Highland Community College, in conjunction with EcoEnergy, is offering a unique program that teaches how to assemble, maintain, and repair wind turbines used in energy generation.

The program currently has 16 students (the maximum allowed in its inaugural semester) and will be selecting 20 new students from a pool of 40 applicants in the fall.

Pete Willging, the Director of Community Relations at Highland, was at the visitors center Friday, setting up a display about Highland's program.

"It is perfect for county visitors who want to see an industry that is up-and-coming in this area," Willging said.

Janet Vrtol, EcoEnergy associate, said the expo will give visitors a chance to see what alternative energy sources can offer.

"We are raising awareness and promoting alternative energy in a positive light," said Vrtol.

Adkins Energy will also have a display at the expo. The Lena-based corn-to-ethanol production facility processes approximately 16 million bushels of corn annually into over 45 million gallons of fuel-grade ethanol.

Residents can also check out actual turbines — new and old — that are on display thanks to Skystream, a local company that specializes in wind energy on a smaller scale.

Interested residents can visit the expo between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

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