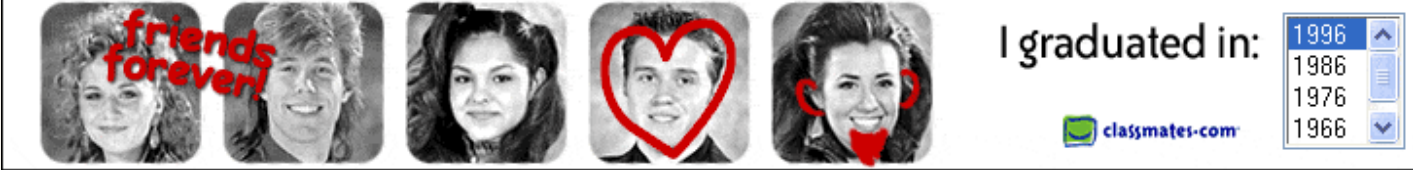



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Stops in NW Ohio on state tour show local 'green' spots Innovations draw attention to region



Austin Mance of Sylvania checks out solar panels at the First Solar plant in Perrysburg Township, a stop on the tour locally. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

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By [TOM HENRY](#)
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Leah Semrock chuckled yesterday when someone visiting her highly unconventional home during the fifth annual Ohio Solar Tour inquired about all the time, sweat, money, and love she and her husband, Ralph, had put into designing it themselves and building it from scratch.

"It's a challenge," she replied, with body language that left no doubt her response was an understatement. "It's not for the meek."

But that's just it.

While the ambitious project the Semrocks undertook is one extreme case of motivation, thousands of people touring sites across Ohio this weekend learned that the once-lofty idea of equipping their homes and businesses with some form of wind, solar, or other renewable energy source is well within their reach.

Diane Miller, who organized northwest Ohio's guided tour, said the goal was to show people that innovative things are happening locally - not just in some distant, ecology-minded state such as California or Colorado.

"We have great things happening in northwest Ohio," she said.

Ms. Miller is at the center of it. In addition to being a volunteer for Green Energy Ohio, a statewide nonprofit group behind the tours, she is the interim assistant director of the University of Toledo's Clean and Alternative Energy Incubator and its affiliated Wright Center for Photovoltaics Innovation and Commercialization. The two facilities at Dorr Street and Westwood Avenue have become a regional hub for alternative energy research that involves the academic and business sectors.

"It is truly the dawning time for solar energy now. It will be a huge industry in the next five to 10 years," Geoff Rich proclaimed during the tour's stop at First Solar's manufacturing plant in Perrysburg Township, where he is employed as a systems engineer. Phoenix-based First Solar is the world's largest producer of thin-film solar panels, the type which alternative energy enthusiasts see as a potential breakthrough for the residential market because they are more affordable than traditional, thicker panels.

A little something for everyone. That's what northwest Ohio offered with its diverse blend of tour stops, which also included the Owens Community College Center for Development and Training, the 577 Foundation in Perrysburg, the AMP Ohio-Green Mountain Energy Co. utility-scale wind turbines and the Green by Design retail establishment near Bowling Green, and various homes from the Maumee-Sylvania corridor east to Sandusky.

The Semrocks' home in Ottawa County's Allen Township, 10 miles east of Oregon, is one of the most unique.

Besides its wind turbine and its solar panels, it is earth-bermed with a finely landscaped, sloping garden. The house, still about a year away

from completion, has numerous other features, including energy-efficient windows, extensive foam insulation, and heat radiating from below a 7-inch concrete basement floor.

It was designed by Mr. Semrock, an Owens professor who owned a solar energy business from 1978 to 1981.

Since his days as a student at Harris-Elmore High School in the 1960s when he constructed an 8-foot-tall observatory to help him gaze up at the stars with his telescope, Mr. Semrock hasn't shied away from ambitious projects.

He calls their home Solterra, a hybrid of words that mean "sun" and "earth."

It is three stories tall and encompasses 2,440 square feet.

"What's exciting is that everything I've designed is working the way it should," Mr. Semrock said.

He said his highest electric bill to date was \$55 one month during the summer of 2006.

During the fall, winter, and spring, his electrical meter rolls backward because his house is generating more power than it is using. That allows him to receive partial credit from FirstEnergy Corp. under Ohio's "net-metering law."

At UT, the role of the incubator is to "help create and grow companies" interested in developing renewable energy.

The university is the lead institution administering an \$18.6 million grant from Ohio's Third Frontier research funding program.

Other schools, including Bowling Green State and Ohio State University, also are involved.

Colleen LaChapelle, who started as the business manager of UT's photovoltaic center on July 16, said budgeting is done 15 years in advance to help sustain programs for the long run.

"There is so much excitement here about the photovoltaic [solar panel] research," she said. "It's going to give Ohio a boost."

The Ohio Solar Tour, which began Friday, winds down today with limited events in other parts of the state. It is part of the 12th annual national solar tour sponsored by the American Solar Energy Society.

The guided northwest Ohio tour attracted dozens of people, including about 70 families. Organizers said they were especially pleased by this year's involvement of young people. Dozens of other people toured sites in the Toledo, Elmore, and Sandusky areas that had extended open houses separate from the guided tour.

Across Ohio, people saw everything from leftover frying oil converted into fuel for automobiles, tractors, and lawn mowers to the \$90,000 solar energy system installed in 2004 at the governor's residence near Columbus.

Statewide, there were 106 sites and 29 guided tours, Bill Spratley, Green Energy Ohio executive director, said.

Co-sponsors of the northwest Ohio offerings included UT, the American Solar Energy Society, and the Ohio Department of Development's office of energy efficiency.

Contact Tom Henry at:
thentry@theblade.com
or 419-724-6079.