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## Mindsets, technology change at Asheville-area expo

By Barbara Blake • August 22, 2010

**FLETCHER** — The rack of bumper stickers on sale at the Southern Energy & Environment Expo on Saturday at the WNC Agricultural Center pretty much summed up the mindset of the exhibitors.

Some bore messages that included “Insatiable is NOT Sustainable,” and “Compost Happens.” Others read, “One Solution Comes Up Every Morning,” and “It’s Clear That Our Technology Has Surpassed Our Humanity.”

The 10th annual exposition, which continues 10 a. m.-5 p.m. today, offers a dizzying array of information on cutting-edge technology systems, solar and wind power, green building, alternative transportation, permaculture and a host of products promoting sustainability.

The fact that attendance at the expo has grown from about 3,000 in its first year to what organizers expect will be more than 8,000 this year indicates that people are paying attention.

“There’s a growing awareness that sustainability in all facets is crucial,” said expo coordinator Ned Doyle. “The economy is waking up a lot of people, and they realize that we need a better way.

“We have the technology to harness free energy; we don’t have to pay for the energy, but we do have to pay for the technology to harness it, and that’s a big mental leap for a lot of people,” Doyle said.

“But more and more people — young, old, liberal, conservative — are realizing that the long-term investment is better than the “give it to me now” mentality, which is a portion of why we’re in the shape we are now.”

Vendor after vendor inside the Ag Center’s new exhibition building said they’ve seen interest in solar power, green building and other sustainability products and services skyrocket in recent years.

Nate Pembleton, co-owner and project manager with First Light Solar, a local company that designs and installs solar hot water and electricity systems, said

he’s seen “tons of interest” in solar energy, especially in Asheville.

“It’s big in California and Florida, but within the Southeast region, Asheville is above and beyond the forefront in solar energy,” Pembleton said. “Our company started four years ago with three owners, and now we have about 60 people on staff, and we’re still growing.”

Some customers invest in solar power because they want to reduce their consumption and environmental impact, while others are more concerned with reducing the amount of money they spend on energy, Pembleton said.

“Solar power can drastically reduce your carbon impact, but it can also drastically reduce your power bill,” he said. “On a typical home, about 25 percent of the electric bill is from hot water, and we can provide 80 percent of that 25 percent.”

After about six years, the time it typically takes to pay off — via power-bill savings — the initial investment of \$6,500-\$7,500 for a solar hot water system, “the system is giving you free hot water, and you’re losing 25 percent of the bill,” Pembleton said.

Hunter Dendy, an architect and inspector for the healthy-built homes program, said high energy costs are compelling more and more people to look at their homes in a different way.

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“With the energy crisis, people are thinking more about building energy-smart and building houses that are durable and healthy to live in,” Dendy said as he greeted visitors to the WNC Green Building Council’s booth.

“I see a lot more people with new construction being more willing to spend more on (energy-smart features) — they’re prioritizing their funds a little differently than in the past,” he said. “People are starting to realize that if they make that initial investment, their power bills are going to be so much lower.”

It wasn’t just enlightened 20-somethings drawn to “green” living who were strolling the booths at the expo Saturday. There were people of all ages, including Don and Carolyn Williams, of Asheville, who are in their 70s.

“We like to keep up with what’s going on, and we wanted to come see if there was anything we could learn that might help us be better stewards of the Earth,” Carolyn Williams said.

Don Williams added, “You’re never too old to learn something new.”

## Go green

The 10th annual Southern Energy & Environment Expo continues 10 a.m.-5 p.m. today at the WNC Agricultural Center, with vendors, educational workshops, presentations, food, music and entertainment. Admission is \$10 for adults 21 and older; \$5 for ages 13-20; free to children 12 and younger. Visit [www.seeexpo.com](http://www.seeexpo.com).

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Emma Skelton, 6, tries out an electric car from Star Electric Vehicles in Spartanburg, SC, on display at the Energy Expo. The Southern Energy and Environment Expo is in exhibition at the WNC Ag Center until Sunday. The exhibition includes vendors, children events and classes all based on sustainability. (Marge Hester/MHESTER@CITIZEN-TIMES.com)

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