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## Going green more than a 'fad' in Central Jersey as decade draws to close

**CENTRAL JERSEY** — Concern for the environment is nothing new in the Garden State, which established the Green Acres program in 1961 to preserve open space and pioneered municipally mandated recycling in the 1980s.

But "going green" — a term once heard only perhaps among college-age environmentalists or third-party candidates — is now taught in schools, influencing policy on state and local levels and shaping business models.

Now, it permeates from the shopping carts, with customers bringing their own bags to stores, to local governments, who are building sustainable municipal complexes and seeking renewable energy sources to plan for the next decade and beyond. It's also influencing business models as companies market themselves as green, and school curricula, which are teaching a new generation of students about climate change and sustainability.

In the past decade, Mike Kerwin, chief executive officer of the Somerset County Business Partnership, said there has been a shift from having to lecture people about why they should go green to people wanting to learn how they could live green.

"It was like this (energy-efficient) light bulb went off," Kerwin said. "The perception changed from this being for tree-huggers and people who are interested in global warming to people understanding that going green made good economic sense - from reducing energy costs to increasing health and productivity."

Somerset County was the first county in the New Jersey to create an Energy Council. The group completed energy audits of all municipal and Board of Education buildings.

Some of the items on the energy audit's to-do list won't cost anything. It may be directives such as turn off the lights and adjust the thermostat at night. Others will have long-term savings, such as replacing leaky windows.

Kerwin, a managing partner at SSP design, was chairman of the Green Design Taskforce and helped create the Green Design Toolkit, a set of steps people could take to create greener buildings around the state. He said there was a massive shift from 2006 when he was pitching the project, to its completion in 2007.

### **GREEN MINDSET**

The Willow School, an environmentally focused school at 1150 Pottersville Road in Peapack-Gladstone, has grown from 13 students when it was founded in 2001 to more than 100 in 2009, said Head of School Kate Burke Walsh. Last year, National Geographic named The Willow School the second most Green School in the nation.

"We've seen really interested, committed young families - people who want to be conscious about the way they live," Walsh said about prospective and current families interested in the K-8 school. Green living is in their day-in, day-out decision making, from switching to environmentally friendly light bulbs to recycling everything possible, she said.

"(In the past decade) the issue of environmental sustainability surpassed political agendas -- before it was a polarizing issue. Now it is overarching, foundational," Walsh said.

Food also has become an important element of the green trend.

The demand for locally grown food keeps Jamie Mirabito and her family busy at Chestnut Ridge Farm, 92 Back Brook Road, in the Ringoes section of East Amwell.

Mirabito said each week she has new customers who want more of a connection with the food they are consuming -- even if it sometimes costs up to twice as much as mass-produced produce found at supermarkets.

During the past decade, Chestnut Ridge Farm's raised-bed garden patch has grown from a few rows to a 7-acre lot.

"This (eating locally grown food) is more than about fuel emissions and ground water. It's about being able to look the farmer who grew that food in the eye. You can ask questions about how something was grown. It's an ongoing discussion," Mirabito said about her customers at the farmers market. "For me, it is about growing great food and eating great food. That's what lights my fire."

Linda Bordman, president of Applegate Farms, a Bridgewater-based natural foods business that was founded 22 years ago, said the green trend has allowed her company to grow from the niche market in health food stores to mainstream supermarkets and venues during the past decade.

## **GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS**

It took Merriam-Webster 10 years after the term "carbon footprint" first appeared in 1999 to define it in its dictionary.

A carbon footprint refers to the amount of carbon dioxide a person or business directly or indirectly releases into the atmosphere, contributing to what is believed to be manmade climate change.

But 10 years before the word's origin, Keasbey-based Bayshore Recycling Co. was on the path toward reducing its clients' carbon footprints.

Bayshore was founded by Valerie Montecalvo, who in the early 1990s realized that much of the refuse from major highway construction could be crushed and turned back into stone and reusable materials.

"Before 'carbon footprint' was on anybody's mind, and global warming, we thought, wow, this has to be great for the environment because these materials you would just dump in a landfill," Montecalvo said.

At first, her idea was unpopular with public officials or contractors unfamiliar with the relatively new technology, she said. But the company outgrew its 3-acre site in Perth Amboy in a matter of months. In 2001, Bayshore moved to 26 acres on the Raritan River in Keasbey and bought another 26 acres three years ago.

The Eco Complex and Energy Campus, as the company calls the site, comprises five family companies that also recycle scrap metal, transport materials by waterways ("easing traffic congestion, alleviating air pollution and reducing greenhouse gas," their Web site advertises) and

treats petroleum-contaminated soils. The company plans to recycle roof shingles and tires, and has invested \$5 million in a new system that will increase the company's construction refuse — such as furniture, wood and glass — recycling rate of 75 percent to 95 percent. The company is getting some of its energy from solar panels and is in talks with three companies to install energy-producing windmills on their property.

## **CHANGED VIEWS**

Bayshore's growth also illustrates how public officials have changed their view on the environment and so-called green-collar jobs in the past decade.

When Montecalvo expressed interest in buying the property in the Keasbey section of Woodbridge in 2001, the township was weighing offers by developers to erect high-rises and luxury housing.

Now, Mayor John E. McCormac touts Bayshore's success in creating local jobs and preserving natural resources as he promotes plans for two major industrial developments focused on green technology. One is a proposal for Sewaren called the Pennval Road Green Technology Park, which will be anchored by a business "incubator" run by Fairleigh Dickinson University's Institute for Sustainable Enterprise. The incubator will nurture start-up businesses in emerging environmental industries. Another project involves cleaning up 655 acres of contaminated brownfields in Keasbey to make way for a green technology business park for companies that would recycle each other's waste products.

While these plans are in the works, the township has begun reducing its carbon footprint by installing solar panels on three municipal buildings, a project that cost \$7 million in state and local money. The panels will harvest from the sun up to 10 percent to 15 percent of the buildings' energy needs. A township firehouse has also decided to add panels to its own roof and the school district is considering whether to make all or some of its more than 20 schools partially solar-powered.

"Solar panels make fiscal sense," McCormac said, adding that he wouldn't have supported the solar plan if the state had not kicked in \$2.4 million. The Sewaren project has received \$250,000 in federal money and a \$15,000 grant from the Citi Foundation. The Keasbey brownfields are eligible for up to \$5 million in state money each year to help pay for clean-up efforts.

The township has also estimated an expected income of \$1.6 million through the sale of Solar Renewable Energy Certificates, which are sold as a commodity and usually purchased by utility companies in lieu of meeting state requirements to produce their own renewable energy.

"There is absolutely no doubt about it, in a lot of these instances there is a substantial capital improvement cost at the front end," said Bill Dressel, director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. "Lots of towns decide that it's well worth that investment because they can document and show the community that it is going to not only save dollars but they are going to reduce, which many feel they have a moral obligation to do, their reliance on fossil fuels."

Dressel said interest by local officials in green issues has grown tremendously since 2006, when the League had just one session on the topic during its annual convention. This year's convention had six programs on topics such as grant funding and green construction.

Also this year, the League hosted its first Sustainable Jersey program, which was attended by more than 400 officials. Dressel and several mayors, including Highland Park's Meryl Frank, developed the idea for the program in 2006. Sustainable Jersey awards municipalities points for such actions as making buildings energy efficient, developing a climate action plan to lower greenhouse gas emissions, launching campaigns to promote healthy lifestyles and promoting recycling.

About 250 municipalities have signed onto the program and the list is growing every week, Dressel said. Towns that participate get a shot at private, state and federal grants.

## LOCAL INVESTMENTS

In Bridgewater, officials are on track to make their new municipal building, now under construction, the first LEED-certified municipal building in the state. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification is a 29-point checklist by the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council of ways to make a structure more environmentally sensitive.

For example, Bridgewater's design includes a system that stores rainwater in an underground tank and reuses it in an irrigation system, energy-efficient lighting, more windows to reduce the artificial lighting and requires contractors to recycle materials taken down during construction.

The project is an investment for taxpayers, said Township Council President Patrick Scaglione.

The pay-off for environmental elements of the \$23.9 million project now under construction may be 20 years from now.

"I would say most municipal officials are, to some extent, getting involved in green initiatives because it's becoming incumbent upon them to pursue conservation strategies that will benefit their residents not only in the short term but in the long term," Dressel said.

Among those initiatives is solar energy. Nearly 5,000 municipalities, businesses and homes draw energy from the sun, according to the state Board of Public Utilities, which has been responsible for doling out rebates for clean energy producers in the state.

One of the largest solar projects is by Public Service Electric and Gas, which intends to place panels on 200,000 utility poles in 300 municipalities. The \$515 million project will double the state's solar capacity by 2013. The program will cost an average residential customer about 10 cents per month in the first year, PSE&G has said. The installation work is being handled by Petra Solar, founded in 2006 and based in South Plainfield. Petra has also received \$2.9 million dollars from the U.S. Energy Department to help develop solar-energy technology for utility companies.