

Fest spotlights sun's huge energy potential

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At this point in San Antonio's relationship to renewable energy and sustainable building practices, it's all about education.

"A lot of people in San Antonio just don't know what's out there," said Mike Lopez, the green building coordinator of Build San Antonio Green.

Lopez spoke at Saturday's Solar Fest at Maverick Park, in front of a table laden with building materials including denim-based insulation, fiber-based walls systems and bamboo flooring.

Solar Fest, now in its fourth year, is about more than just solar power. It's an annual showcase of the latest in renewable energy, energy-saving techniques and sustainable building applications.

Lopez grabbed a soft, fuzzy wedge of insulation. The recycled denim used to make it would have ended up in a landfill.

Instead, it's shredded, then treated with boric acid, which makes it termite- and mold-resistant, but not harmful to humans. It doesn't release noxious gasses for years the way traditional pink insulation does, or does it send nasty slivers of fiberglass into the skin of the person working with it.

Build Green San Antonio is a collaboration of the Greater San Antonio Builders Association and the Metropolitan Partnership for Energy, itself a coalition of local government agencies working to promote more renewable, sustainable everything, from building materials to alternative energy sources.

The partnership recently consolidated offices with Solar San Antonio, the nonprofit advocacy and resource center for renewable energy applications that hosts Solar Fest.

Bill Sinkin, the city's guru of all things solar, renewable and sustainable, founded both organizations. The 92-year-old has spent years pushing city and county institutions to take advantage of the sun.

Change is taking place slowly in the Alamo City, but county Commissioner Tommy Adkisson has taken up Sinkin's crusade.

With the help of Vince Fuentes, "the finest energy manager in the region," Adkisson and his fellow commissioners authorized the largest solar hot-water collector in the state, atop the Bexar County Jail.

The system saves the county about \$55,000 a year. Adkisson would like to duplicate it at facilities all over.

The county also has developed alternative energy-intensive affordable housing, with roof-mounted solar panels, rainwater cisterns and the most efficient central heat and air systems made.

In August, the county will build the first "E85" fleet maintenance facility in the state. E85 is fuel made with 85 percent ethanol.

"I'd rather give money to corn farmers than oil barons in the Middle East," said Adkisson.

Better yet, he'd like to increase the amount of energy that comes from the sun.

"Texas has always had more sun than oil," he said. "Not many people know this, but Texas imports 65 percent of its energy. That's absolutely disgraceful."