

News & Views: Cover Story

Georgia's green economy

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Matt Hoots has very little downtime.

When the 32-year-old CEO of the Hoots Group isn't fielding calls from homeowners who want to retrofit their homes to be more energy efficient, he's researching green design concepts or scouring state and federal websites for rebates and incentives for his customers.

It's not just Hoots who's busy, either. Across metro Atlanta, there's a growing number of businesses that specialize in clean energy and green living — in addition to an increase in existing businesses that are waking up to the benefits of going green.

While Georgia unemployment ranks higher than the national average and new construction is at the lowest anyone can remember, Hoots, whose company has built the largest number of energy-efficient homes in the Southeast, says his business is thriving. Customer calls are four times what they were the same time one year ago.

“We're expecting our company to double or triple in size this year,” he says.

Hoots is part of a movement whose time many eco-minded advocates say has come. He and others are hoping to prove that helping the environment is a good way to create jobs, provide an invaluable service, make the Earth cleaner — and actually turn a profit.

Call it Georgia's green awakening. From Conyers' Acuity Brands Lighting, one of the country's largest manufacturers of energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulbs, to Norcross-based upstart Suniva, one of the solar energy industry's brightest up-and-comers, the region is seeing glimmers of hope for a greener future.

Throw in Refuel, the local biodiesel outfit that's attracted national attention for converting used cooking oil into cleaner-burning fuel for automobiles, and Southface, considered the tried-and-true leader of energy-efficiency training institutions, and you have a metro region with a proven demand for green alternatives.

Even Georgia's filthy coal-burning plants have some emerging competition. Researchers and utilities are finding ways to partner and use the state's 25 million acres of timber to create power from biomass. Two weeks ago, the federal government said wind off the Peach State's coast could spin the blades of energy-producing turbines. All of which means that Georgia might be shaking its reputation as a coal-powered Neanderthal.

But there's still a long way to go. And if the state can take advantage of the spirit of its entrepreneurs — as well as the \$97 million in weatherization funds under President Barack Obama's stimulus package — experts say green-collar jobs could be the shot in the arm Georgia's economy sorely needs. We're talking jobs with decent wages and environmental benefits — and, most importantly, ones that aren't likely to be shipped overseas.

J. Bryan Ashley, vice president of marketing and sales at Suniva, says one reason the solar-cell manufacturer chose to locate in metro Atlanta was to be near Georgia Tech, where Suniva founder Ajeet Rohatgi helps lead

solar power research.

Another reason, he says, was “to prove solar can work [in Georgia].”

Suniva already has landed \$1 billion in contracts with companies in Europe and India, and it recently inked a deal with Jacoby Development to install its solar technology at the proposed “Aerotropolis” mixed-use project at the shuttered Hapeville Ford plant. A work force of 85 is expected to hit triple digits by the end of the year.

Ashley describes Suniva’s work force as “very well-paying green-tech jobs.” The company, he says, employs military veterans and workers from the hard-hit automotive industry, showing that traditional manufacturing skills can be applied to cutting-edge technology.

“We’re proof that the green economy can take people from either dying or other industries and offer new hope and rejuvenation. I think Obama was right about making jobs and keeping them at home. We just have to be sure this money goes to companies that manufacture in America.”

Energy-efficiency gurus say the market sector that’s poised to benefit most from green growth is the housing and construction industry — one that’s been battered by the foreclosure crisis and credit crunch. Consider the number of carpenters, electricians and plumbers who are out of work now that the housing bubble has burst. Then consider that many of those unemployed-yet-skilled workers could be employed weatherizing homes to make them more energy efficient — essentially by sealing the ducts, installing power-saving fixtures, caulking windows, and retrofitting the buildings where we live and work.

“Here in Atlanta and Georgia, we import all our energy,” says Dennis Creech, executive director of the green-building nonprofit Southface. “So when we save energy and use renewable [energy sources], those are green jobs that stay in our state. Some of the most important green jobs are going to be sealing leaky ducts in houses and installing energy-efficient lighting in commercial buildings.”

David Ellis, executive vice president of the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association, says the organization’s green-building program has seen the most growth of any of the educational programs it offers.

What’s more, groups are forming to help people interested in green jobs connect with the opportunities.

In the summer of 2008, Georgia Tech professor Ofra Tessler and research scientist Gailit Levitin formed the Green Chamber of the South, an organization modeled after chambers of commerce. The agency is like one big social networker for green workers and employers, connecting them through seminars and meet-and-greets. The Green Chamber has seen membership blossom from five to 40 companies in the past year.

Like Tessler and Levitin, Gayle Oliver-Plath didn’t have to pick up a hammer or install a solar panel to make the transition to a green-collar job.

Last year, Oliver-Plath left her 20-year career of executive recruiting, resume writing and career counseling to start a new endeavor: CareerEco.com, a networking service that caters exclusively to metro Atlantans interested in sustainability jobs.

“In the past six to nine months, everybody and their brother [has come to] understand this is here to stay,” Oliver-Plath says. “There’s a whole population of people who say there’s a business opportunity to this.”

Oliver-Plath has hosted events to connect everyone from baby boomers looking to change careers to students looking to start their own. She says people shouldn’t think of green-collar jobs as just building wind turbines and installing insulation.

“If you're an engineer, think about environmental engineering,” she says. “An accountant? Think about greenhouse gas emissions and how those can be measured. If you're a salesperson, go into solar. For every single kind of discipline, there's a way to put yourself into the green community.”

Creech, of Southface, agrees: “If I'm manufacturing pencil sharpeners, how do I make sure I'm using resources wisely to manufacture those pencil sharpeners, so that we're reducing waste, reusing energy wisely, and not wasting water? Every job has the potential to be greener.”

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