

Got a green idea? Start here

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BizTech energy center could help with project

If you have a good idea, say a car powered by water, but are not sure how to turn it into a reality and a business, the Renewable Energy Outreach center at BizTech is ready to take your call.

The outreach center is led by Ruchi Singhal, who formerly coordinated North Carolina's Clean Transportation program. Singhal, who moved with her husband to Huntsville last year, was recruited by BizTech's Dick Reeves, to coordinate the grant-funded effort.

The grant funds came from a combination of sources, including the U.S. Department of Labor through its regional economic development WIRED program and money from the Appalachian Regional council and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, ADECA.

"The grant's aim is to bring in more energy entrepreneurs," said Singhal, a graduate of Georgia Tech with a master's in chemical engineering from North Carolina State University. "We've started by doing more educational and outreach programs and trying to get information to people."

Singhal has spent time figuring out who is working on energy projects in Alabama and those trying to support such efforts. Key partners include ADECA, which has an energy division, and the Shoals Entrepreneurial Center, a business incubator like BizTech.

Singhal said a coordinated efforts means she can help spread the word about new opportunities and share the workload with ADECA.

She said she is committed to putting in the time and using her knack for helping people make the contacts they need to move a project forward.

That will also include helping find investors. The Huntsville Angel Network, which can provide investment capital, or advice on where to find it, is affiliated with Renewable Energy Outreach.

Singhal said there is much work to be done including getting a state renewable fuel standard to power state vehicles, but Alabama companies have made major strides in areas such as developing biomass energy.

Congress is debating requiring electricity providers to get 25 percent of their power from renewable energy sources by 2025. If passed, it would open up huge new markets for green energy companies.

The White House is also making green energy a cornerstone of its economic policies, and there is already quite a bit of federal money available for energy projects and start-ups.

"I don't have any qualms about putting in the time if it's going to help people," Singhal said. "I would love to see people actually apply for some of these funds."

Singhal points to the grants.gov Web site as a source of information for a large range of grant opportunities. There are also loan guarantee programs for renewable energy companies and more money is expected through Department of Energy projects.

But an obvious challenge is turning a concept into a viable operating model.

Singhal said she is happy to sit down with people who've worked out some ideas and have a plan.

"Hopefully, they start with a really good business model, which includes a real budget and a real-life market strategy," she said. "We can then help them consider the real-life problems they will face. Meeting with somebody like me, we can go over that stuff and help them."

Singhal said Huntsville is full of smart people with good ideas, but the network to support them will require, among other things, a larger commitment toward energy research from the local universities

Singhal said Alabama A&M has a number of efforts under way that combine the university's strong agriculture education programs with new forays into energy research. Singhal's hope is that over time the universities will commit more resources toward energy focused projects and education, which will spur new ideas and eventually new companies.

"I'd love to see some of these entrepreneurs actually fulfill their dreams," Singhal said. "We want to be consultants and help everyone else. We want to see that really work - see people get grants, start a business and start reducing traditional energy consumption."