

# Anthony Westbury: The future is green - bright green - for St. Lucie County

By Anthony Westbury

Monday, August 2, 2010

They've dubbed it the "Green Mile," but an experimental corridor intended to test emerging energy-saving technology could expand far further than just a few yards in Fort Pierce. The eventual benefits it could bring to the entire county might be enormous.

We've been hearing "Project Energy" rumors for months, but last week it was announced that the Green Mile idea will provide a real-world test bed for new products sanctioned by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. Suddenly with one announcement we've gone from a sleepy Florida county to a nationally (actually, make that internationally) known location that embraces and encourages the greater use of green technologies.

And soon, super-secret meetings are slated with a very large multinational energy company that seems very interested in us (but no one will name yet). Already other European companies have come calling, too.

St. Lucie County Commissioner Doug Coward, a leading member of the Green Mile task force (along with Fort Pierce city officials and other players such as Dr. Ed Massey from Indian River State College), says the speed of the change has taken even him by surprise.

"I like to think of myself as an optimist," Coward said recently, "but what I thought of as a five-year plan is happening in a year or less."

Coward's creation of an innovative solar panel loan program late last year may have been the impetus that put us on the map.

"We were the only county in Florida," to apply for a Department of Energy grant earlier this year to make the program possible, Coward said. It was probably that fact (and our sunny geography) that piqued Oak Ridge's interest.

St. Lucie received a \$2.9 million DOE grant that will accelerate the loan program, enabling us to hire an executive director and get the ball rolling.

Coward is hoping the first loan approvals for solar hot water systems will happen within the next 60 days.

Once the effectiveness of the program has been proven, Coward believes the U.S. Department of the Treasury will give the green light to the banking consortium that has pledged \$20 million toward the project. The loan process should be in full swing by mid-2011, he hopes.

Interest in setting up similar programs, Coward said, has already flooded in from seven other Florida counties, including the biggies in Dade, Broward and Palm Beach. And that may be just the beginning.

The third leg of the stool is how the loan program, in conjunction with Oak Ridge's "seal of approval," could bring lots of jobs to the area.

If solar panel and other green technology companies can be persuaded to locate here, the sky's the limit for job creation in sales, marketing, manufacturing and installation capacities.

Coward said he's talked with the region's biggest solar installer, who believes there's more potential installation business on the Treasure Coast than they could handle alone in the next few years.

Oak Ridge's association with St. Lucie could also prove very lucrative in attracting both federal and state grants, Coward said.

While Fort Pierce is the location for the first Green Mile — and city officials are currently working out exactly where that test area would be — there should be opportunities for other cities.

Coward's already heard from several Port St. Lucie constituents wondering when they'll get some of the benefits, too. Never fear, Coward says, he's hoping to extend the Green Mile toward the southern parts of the county as well.

We've risen from quiet backwater to hot green center in a matter of months. We always claimed to be green-friendly, now we get to prove it.

Let the greening of St. Lucie begin.

*Anthony Westbury is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column*

*reflects his opinion. For more on St. Lucie County topics, follow his blog at [tcpalm.com/westbury](http://tcpalm.com/westbury). Contact him at (772) 409-1320 or [anthony.westbury@scripps.com](mailto:anthony.westbury@scripps.com).*

---



© 2010 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online