



## Solar conference focuses on S. Arizona's future

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Government officials from around southern Arizona learned Monday how to better tap into the power of the sun.

More than 150 people attended the Southern Arizona Solar Energy Development Conference at the Arizona Historical Society, 949 E. Second St.

The event offered policymakers information they need to embrace solar and other forms of renewable energy, said U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords.

The event was sponsored by Giffords and the Arizona Research Institute for Solar Energy - AzRISE - based at the University of Arizona.

Attendees included city, town, county and state officials as well as people involved in the solar industry.

People learned how to effectively use solar and renewable energy sources, were offered the opportunity to connect with key players in the industry and gave examples of lessons learned in past solar projects, Giffords said.

Henrietta "Hank" Huisking, Sierra Vista city council member, came to see how her city could save money on electric bills.

Sierra Vista wants to use renewable energy to dramatically cut the \$600,000 it pays each year on electricity for its wastewater treatment operations, Huisking said. She is the city council's liaison to the city's environmental affairs commission.

"We think we can reduce our energy bill by half by using solar energy," she said.

The event offered examples of how other communities succeeded with solar, and allowed Huisking to chat with experts in the field.

"We're waiting for all the pieces of the puzzle to come into place before we do a big project," she said.

Money and determination are the two ingredients needed to make Arizona a world solar capital, said Valerie Rauluk, CEO at Venture Catalyst Inc., a sustainable energy development and community development firm.

"We are a second or third tier market for solar energy; sad but true," Rauluk said.

Large-scale solar development is needed here, she said.

"We're going to need more ratepayer/taxpayer investment," she said.

A weak dollar and rising international demand is hiking the price of solar devices here, she said.

Rising natural gas and coal costs mean solar energy could soon become cost effective.

"We're very close to being competitive with fossil fuels," she said. "Photovoltaic is within three to five years of parity with fossil fuel generation."

Tucson is seeking bids to move ahead with two solar projects, said Bruce Plenk, the city's solar energy coordinator.

The city is seeking a builder for a 1 megawatt photovoltaic solar facility in Avra Valley to be completed by the end of the year, with another 4 megawatts to come online by the end of 2009, he said.

The city plans to eventually place 100 megawatts of thermal solar generation at the Avra Valley site, Mayor Bob Walkup said at Monday's solar conference.

The city is also seeking bids to install up to 1 megawatt of photovoltaic solar panels on seven city buildings, Plenk said.

That project would be funded by selling up to \$7.7 million in federal Clean Renewable Energy Bonds, he said.