

All Aboard the Solar Express
Athens Banner Herald June

by Tim Echols

It wasn't until I entered the training room of Mage Solar in Dublin, Ga. and saw 40 subcontractors in their solar academy that I got it. The growing solar industry is not just about funky collectors on a roof or left-leaning environmentalists who hate fossil fuel.

It is about skilled jobs in manufacturing and construction, about economic development in Georgia, about consumers saving money on their power bill so they can spend it somewhere else, and about empowering people to essentially create their own power plant. This could eventually be big.

And that is why I am putting together the "Solar Express" on July 29th and inviting Georgians to join me in Cordele and board the SamShortline, the state's excursion train, to learn more about solar power through a rolling seminar and day of education for the whole family. This vintage passenger train will have one entire train car of solar displays and interactive learning opportunities with whistle-stop press conferences all along the way as it travels west through Americus, Leslie and eventually Plains in rural Southwest, Ga.

I speak from personal experience about this technology. I have solar on my Athens home and use it to heat my hot water, which my family of nine uses a lot of. I recently did an event at a Parker's Convenience store in Brunswick to highlight the 120 panels on the roof of his store that nets him about \$1000 per month.

And on the way down to Brunswick, I did a ribbon-cutting for the first public solar powered electric-car charging station.

Smart people come up with some ingenious solutions to the problems we face, and in time the price of these inventions will come down. I remember when Texas Instruments calculators were outrageously expensive and my Compaq laptop needed a small hand-truck to wheel it around. I remember paying \$1500 for a car phone in 1985 that could not leave the car. Such is the case with energy technology I think.

Solar is growing with companies like Mage coming from Germany to Georgia to manufacture solar systems and train people how to install them. South Georgia Technical College, Gwinnett Tech and Savannah Tech are offering "Solar PV 101" this Fall to teach their technical college students how to install and service Solar Photo Voltaic, the type of panel that converts the sun's rays into electricity.

Power Partners Solar of Athens is manufacturing solar hot water heating collectors and has approved installers for customers around the globe, including my house. Suniva, the fastest growing private company in Atlanta, does both research and manufacturing of sophisticated photovoltaic solar cell technology. All this means jobs for Georgians—both in the manufacturing and service sector.

Fortune 500 companies, enterprising consumers, and energy conscious farms and businesses are the early adapters of this technology. Their purchase of this technology, albeit at higher prices, is helping to bring down the price for the rest of us—just like in the infancy of mobile phones. Recently, one of my fellow Commissioners issued a call to the Power Company to produce more solar, and I have a feeling they will respond as the price continues to drop.

Panels are coming down in cost, and stockholders continue to appreciate diversity in an energy portfolio. So far, the Georgia Legislature has resisted setting renewable portfolio energy standards that would mandate the use of energy like wind, geothermal or solar, and I don't see that changing anytime in the near future. The infamous "Cap and Trade" legislation, as it is called at the federal level, is thankfully dead for now with the GOP in charge of the House of Representatives. And that is a good thing because such a mandate would have a devastating impact on the Georgia economy according to many. As a hedge against any future mandate though, developing a clean energy portfolio with more nuclear and solar makes sense given the increasingly heavy-hand of the federal government via the EPA. I like the fact that Georgia Power allows customers to utilize solar technology on a voluntary basis. Customers can buy a block of green energy for about \$3.50 per month.

This power, generated through renewable sources like bio-mass or solar, helps the utility build the infrastructure to capture this more expensive form of energy. Such programs encourage greater investment in renewable energy without forcing uninterested customers to participate. I would like to see the Company advertise this program more and join me in educating people about the benefit of solar, including the fact that the cost of solar is cheaper than "peak" power.

As solar comes down in price, I hope more and more Georgians will take advantage of this ever growing home-grown technology and the supply chain that it spawns. Meanwhile, go to www.samshortline.com and get tickets for you and your family on the Solar Express, July 29th. All Aboard!