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## Going Green Becomes a Way of Life

Residents, businesses practice conservation throughout the region

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Jared Haines holds a solar panel at Mercury Solar Systems in Port Chester. (Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News)

Being green means more than just Kermit the Frog these days.

It's become the shorthand for being environmentally aware: for using pesticide- or chemical-free products and eschewing food dyes; buying a hybrid car; and installing skylights, solar panels and geothermal heating systems.

It is used to describe why we must reduce car and truck emissions and curb leaf blowers, and to encourage trash recycling, planting more trees and turning off the tap while brushing your teeth.

Energy conservation is coming of age, grassroots advocates and professionals say, and it's all about saving what's available today before it's gone.

"Why should people care? It's about the future," said Frank J. Alfano, president and chief executive officer of Mercury Solar Systems, whose Port Chester-based business has installed 70 percent of the commercial and residential solar panel energy systems in New York.

"We need to look to at least slow down our production of carbon into the atmosphere. Being green is good for future generations — our kids. Right now, we're making a small dent in our carbon footprint. Fossil fuels ... eventually will run out. We need to look to new technology," he said. "There will always be pioneers taking advantage of what's available, and that's what we have here. A lot of our customers are pioneers."

For years, people who advocated cutting back their energy consumption or worried about noise and air pollution were dismissed as alarmists or dreamers. Not anymore.

"I think people are more aware," said Andrea Pollak, who was a member of Eastchester's environmental

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committee and last year spoke with Waverly School students about going green. She is behind a push to make the school's lunch hour waste-free, and to discourage sugary and artificially colored snacks from being sold.

"Two years ago, people were not very aware. Now, I hear people saying, 'I'll only buy organic' or not buying products with (chemical) pesticides. It seems to be catching on," Pollak said. "I'm very encouraged. There's been a big jump in interest in the last two years. Three years ago, I would have seen a lot of eye-rolling. Now the PTA president said they took artificial colors out of their diet. If the president of the PTA is agreeing with me and I have the principal of my son's school inviting me in to talk, I don't feel I'm alone anymore."

Pollak credits former Vice President Al Gore with the growing acceptance and interest in green technologies and policies. After his film "An Inconvenient Truth" was released, books and media outlets on environmental policies were everywhere, she said. With information came awareness.

Alfano used that interest in the environment to craft Mercury from several smaller solar panel companies operating on the East Coast. The West Coast, he said, is ahead of New York and New Jersey in solar power, but he has seen a noticeable increase in people purchasing solar panels, even though they are more expensive initially than other energy systems.

"I came out of IT, got involved in the build-out of the Internet in the mid-2000's," Alfano said. "I was looking for ... the next trend, and getting involved in the renewable energy really struck a chord. In the U.S., we need to wean ourselves off fossil fuels. We thought it was obvious that solar was ready to take off on the East Coast. The byproduct is, you get to do something that's really good for the environment. It's grown beyond what we originally anticipated."

The government's incentive and grant programs haven't hurt, either, he said.

Jared Haines, president of Mercury Solar Systems, said an average solar panel setup of 5 kilowatts costs \$25,000; state and county incentives can total \$21,000, making the initial outlay much more affordable.

"You save (in utility costs) about \$1,200 a year. You are looking at 3 years for the system to pay itself out," he said. "Two or three years ago, it was still the wealthy or (environmental activists); now, it's mainstreamed. People see it as a necessity to reduce their costs over time. I think it's the combination of environmental benefits with the cost of electricity going up and solar panels becoming more affordable. It's a no-brainer."

Buying Energy Star products from windows to clothes dryers makes the purchaser eligible for tax write-offs. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority gives money to schools, businesses and even private individuals who qualify for grants based on energy-reduction plans.

Globally, the U.S. is not a leader in being green. According to information from [blog.sustainablog.org](http://blog.sustainablog.org), Germany is the leader in photo-voltaic solar panels, with more than a third of the world's photovoltaic megawatts created and used there, followed by Spain, Japan and the U.S.

Locally, according to the state energy authority, in Westchester there are 160 solar electric installations —

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114 residential, 39 commercial, six nonprofits and one industrial use. They cost about \$19 million, and reimbursements picked up 44 percent of the costs.

In Putnam there are 11 residential and two commercial solar projects costing \$1.146 million, with the state providing more than \$500,000 in incentives. In Rockland there are 25 residential and five commercial solar projects that cost \$1.5 million, with \$670,000 in incentives provided by the state.

Right now, the majority of people who go green do so in small bites, such as purchasing fluorescent instead of incandescent bulbs or using a rake instead of a leaf blower. Using a drinking fountain instead of a water bottle and recycling cans, bottles and plastic also are commonplace.

"Being completely green may be only for the wealthy right now, because some of the stuff is expensive," Pollak said.

With more people going green, though, the price will come down, she said.