

Acton Green Energy Fair focuses on improving environment

By Christian Schiavone/Staff Writer

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Acton, Mass. - Despite the gray afternoon, things took on a distinctively greenish hue at R.J. Grey Junior High School where dozens of residents gathered on May 17 to learn about the latest in renewable energy.

From a Volkswagen that runs on grease left over from frying thousands of French fries to a lawn mower powered by rechargeable batteries to demonstrations of miniature wind turbines, the [Acton Green Energy Fair](#) offered attendees a snapshot of the options to reduce their carbon footprints.

“This is both important for us to do and it’s also exciting. This is a compelling transformation we’re in the middle of,” said Kate Crosby, a member of the Acton-Boxborough Parent Involvement Project who helped organize the fair.

The [Parent Involvement Project](#) co-hosted the event with [Green Acton](#), a group of local volunteers. Crosby said she hopes the fair will become a regular event in Acton to bring together information about alternative energy as well as vendors of products like solar panels and miniature wind turbines.



Christian Schiavone/Wicked Local staff photographer

Cameron Dindal, 9, of Acton, inspects the paint job on Max Hall's Microfurther tri-hybrid at the Acton Green Energy Fair on May 17

One of the biggest stars of the afternoon was Max Hall’s “Microfurther” — a 40-year-old three-wheeled Italian vehicle that Hall converted into what he calls a “tri-hybrid” because it can run on propane gas, diesel fuel or an electric battery, all using technology that’s existed since the turn of the 20th century.

Mixed in with a row of brand new, state-of-the art Honda and Toyota hybrids, Hall’s creation looked something like a cross between a pickup truck and a moped, topped off with peace signs, rainbows and flowers painted with the help of Hall’s 4-year-old daughter.

Hall, a Sudbury resident, said the Microfurther is far from a comfortable ride — traveling at its top speed of 45 miles per hour isn’t recommended for the faint of heart — but it demonstrates the viability of alternative energy.

“My perspective on the world is that there’s nothing we need to invent to be using far less energy to do what we’re doing anyway,” said Hall, as a group of curious children honked the vehicle’s horn and bounced on its backseat, which was borrowed from a minivan. “The idea that the government needs to give money to the Big Three again to develop new technology is

absurd.” Hall began the conversion with the help of his students at Concord Academy, where he taught for nine years. The Microfurther makes occasional trips to [The Discovery Museums](#) in Acton.

Cameron Dindal, 9, and his sister Jillian, 4, jumped at a chance to climb behind the controls of the Microfurther.



“I can’t believe how much people are polluting,” said Cameron, after grabbing some promotional material on the new Honda Insight hybrid parked nearby. “If I had a wish, it’d be that exhaust pipes never existed.”

Across the school’s parking lot, was another, slightly more modern project car — a 2003 Volkswagen Jetta TDI that owner Eric Hudson converted to run on used frying oil he gets from an Italian restaurant in Concord.

When Hudson turns the key, the engine is powered by biodiesel. After the motor heats up the frying oil, which congeals when cold, Hudson throws a switch on the dashboard and starts the engine burning the environmentally friendly oil.

The conversion only boosted the vehicle’s already impressive gas mileage from 47 miles per gallon to about 50. But Hudson said the goal was more about doing his part to reduce environmentally harmful emissions, a view that he sees becoming increasingly popular.

“A lot of people are rethinking the way we’re tapping our energy, using our energy and living our lives,” said Hudson, who owns Preserve, a company that makes eco-friendly toothbrushes, razors and kitchenware. “A larger and larger percentage of people are trying to have less and less of an impact of the environment and that’s great.”

Within the past year, Acton residents have formed [Green Acton](#) and the [Green Advisory Board](#), two citizens groups whose goal is reducing climate change. In 2007, local volunteers spearheaded a project to install an array of solar panels on the concession stand next to Leary Field. Not everyone in Acton who has started down the road to going green has done so in such deliberate fashion.

Mark Bramhall bought his home in North Acton primarily for the 16 acres of woods on the property. The solar panel arrays already installed by a previous owner were an added bonus. Bramhall now uses the solar panels to power everything in the house except appliances like the refrigerator that have to run constantly. A meter displaying how much power is being used has also served as an eye opener for just how much electricity it takes to power a home.

“It just came that way, so we said, ‘Sure, why not?’” he said, standing behind a table displaying a miniature solar panel system. “It raises your consciousness. Pretty soon you learn what things take a lot of power and which things don’t and you tend to gravitate toward the ones that don’t.”

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