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a greener future

Builders see demand for homes based on sustainability

By **JOE ORSO**
La Crosse Tribune

The majority of homes and buildings in Wisconsin get energy today from the same sources — mostly nonrenewable natural gas and electricity from coal, considered a major polluter.

But the energy landscape is changing.

It's being reshaped by architects such as Roald Gundersen, whose home gets more than 70 percent of its energy from the sun, and by large organizations such as Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center, which by year's end will tap as alternative energy sources both sunlight and methane that City Brewery now burns as waste.

Gundersen, a local architect who builds homes and structures with small-diameter, unmilled trees, foresees a future in which it's common for people to produce some of their own electricity from renewable sources bought relatively cheap at retail stores.

"People are going to say, 'God, remember back in 2008? Nobody had their own electricity. Now, 30 percent of us generate our electricity,'" Gundersen said.

"It'll be like the Internet. Only 14 years ago, I had never been on the Internet."

The number of photovoltaic, or solar electric, systems being installed in Wisconsin each year is growing by 80 percent, said Don Wichert, director of the Focus on Energy's Renewable Energy Program.

This energy transformation is one component of a wave of sustainability beginning to reshape structures in the region.

From construction methods incorporating straw bales, earthen bricks, recycled carpeting or non-toxic paint to finding local materials to cutting down on waste during construction, the dwellings that shelter humans here are beginning to reflect a growing concern about the environmental impact of human activities.



Roald Gundersen built an office space on his property, left, which he calls "the book end." The space is adjacent to a green house where he and his wife grow food for themselves and their local community-supported agriculture program.



PHOTOS BY PETER THOMSON/LA CROSSE TRIBUNE

Sustainable architect and builder Roald Gundersen lives in an A-frame house insulated with straw bales and supported with timber poles in the bluffs between La Crosse and Coon Valley. To help solve environmental problems in the area, Gundersen said he'd like to see more mixed-use developments that would allow people to walk more and drive less. He also imagined a solution to La Crosse's flooding problems: "I'm surprised the city hasn't thought of paying people something off their property taxes if they maintain rain gardens."

INSIDE TODAY

SPECIAL SECTION:

Individuals and families are asking themselves what they can do to conserve resources and preserve our environment. Communities — and even entire countries — are making these types of changes, and they add up. The "Go Green" edition inside today's Tribune focuses on what you personally can do. This guide to "going green" is the second in a series of publications by the Tribune that will help you in everyday life.



A transitional period

Many builders in the region are in a transitional period, in which sustainable building practices play a still small but increasingly larger role in construction and in

what consumers — such as Gundersen Lutheran — seek.

Reducing energy use and finding clean, renewable sources is central to becoming sustainable.

Wisconsin saw 23.6 mil-

lion tons of coal burned in 2006 to produce 70 percent of the state's electricity, according to a report by the Wisconsin Office of Energy Independence. Coal accounted for 29.5 percent of the energy used in the state. In 2004 electricity production contributed 42 percent of the state's carbon dioxide pollution, a leading factor in climate change, according to a recent Wisconsin Environment report.

By the end of 2008, solar energy will provide the electricity in Gundersen Lutheran's new parking garage and heat some of the water in its laundry operations. The hospital plans to break ground in 2009 on a critical care facility that will be 100 percent powered by renewable sources.

Administrators also are exploring ways to produce

wind energy at the hospital and are developing a comprehensive plan on how sustainability will shape the medical center's future.

"We can decrease the cost of health care and be environmentally sound at the same time," said Gundersen Lutheran CEO Dr. Jeff Thompson.

"That's what we're going to prove to people, that's why we'll get national recognition, and that's what we'll be able to teach other health care facilities."



Thompson

A better bottom line

As with most other

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