

Rider uses solar-powered bike to fuel alternative energy talk

By Mark Fischenich

The Free Press

ST PETER— Tom Cook admits that the solar powered bike that he rode Saturday from Mankato to St. Peter is largely an attention-getting gimmick.

Not that the bike doesn't work. The electric motor can be switched on to assist the pedal power provided by the rider, making hill-climbing a breeze. Cook figures he climbed the hill to Gustavus about three times faster than he would have without the motor.

The batteries on the bike, when fully charged from an overnight plug-in, can help power the bike for 30 miles. And the solar panels can add another 10 to 12 miles to the bike's range.

The system is even designed so the motor can be used as a generator to recharge the batteries when the bike is going downhill.

"It's a great technology," said Cook, a University of Iowa professor who was part of the eight-day Green Bike Tour through southern Minnesota, southeastern South Dakota, northeast Nebraska and northern Iowa.

But that's really not the point of the trip. The point is to get people talking about the connection between energy, transportation, the environment and the economy.

The basic message is this: Global warming is real, renewable energy can help alleviate climate change and there's money to be made, especially in this part of the country.

"Rural communities can make money because we're blessed with a lot of wind and corn," Cook said.

David Osterberg, a professor of occupational and environmental health at the University of Iowa, is participating in his fifth Green Bike Tour, and he said the result is always the same. The bikes draw attention, but the focus always shifts to what local folks are already doing to reduce the impact of global warming.

After visiting Minnesota State University, where there was talk of the school's automotive engineering efforts centered on renewable fuels, the group rode to Gustavus. There, state Rep. Ruth Johnson spoke of the effort just down the road to convert methane gas from a 3,000-cow

dairy herd into electricity.

“This is not science fiction,” Johnson said. “It works. We’re doing it in Minnesota.”

She also spoke of the on-going initiative at Gustavus to bring wind turbines to campus to help power the private college. And Johnson pointed to St. Peter School Board Chairman Terry Morrow and the board’s efforts to invest in wind energy from southwestern Minnesota’s breezy Buffalo Ridge wind farm.

Federal approval for that venture, which the board believes will save tax dollars while providing an opportunity to educate students about renewable energy, could come later this fall.

Osterberg said the somewhat goofy-looking, solar-panel-packing bike did its job again Saturday, getting people revved up about good work people are doing in this area to make the world’s climate a little less sickly.

“We’re a catalyst,” he said, “and that chemical reaction is made a little easier when the Green Bikes come to town.”

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Photos



Tom Cook, a participant in the Green Bike Tour, answers questions about two bikes that provide supplemental power from an electric motor — including one solar-powered version. Pat Christman



This plug-in electric-assist bike has the motor at the axle and the battery-pack above the wheel. About a penny and a half of electricity will keep the motor running for 10 miles. Pat Christman