

# A Visit to the Clean Energy Outlet

An Innovative New Storefront Offers One-Stop Shopping for Energy Efficiency



By Sarah Rigg

Depot Town is home to an innovative new storefront, the Clean Energy Outlet. The outlet, which opened in summer of 2009, offers a one-stop shop for products, classes and services related to energy efficiency.

The Outlet is also a more public face for the Clean Energy Coalition, which started as a federally funded “Clean Cities” program in Ann Arbor City Hall. Over several years, the CEC grew to become an independent nonprofit headquartered in a fourth-floor office on Pearl Street. The CEC continued to grow from a one-man operation, headed by Director Sean Read, to a larger operation with six full-time employees.

When Reed looked for a new office space to accommodate the expanding team, he found what Outlet Project Manager Deb Heed calls “a lovely space” in Depot Town.

Until recently, the main focus of the CEC has been major public projects, such as clean transportation and biofuel infrastructure and energy efficiency in commercial buildings. However, the new location sparked the idea for a retail space and more public interaction for the organization.

Heed started volunteering for the CEC in February of 2009 and later was hired as an employee. She said she had the opportunity to get involved in a variety of projects, but the one that jumped out at her was the idea of the storefront. The retail space on the street level would allow the CEC staff to interact more directly with the public and help the average homeowner or apartment-dweller.

“We had a vision of giving a new public face to our nonprofit and providing more direct education opportunities,” Heed said.

Heed said that area residents who have attended the Outlet’s last few classes say they’re grateful to have a place to go for all things energy efficient. “We’re a one-stop shop for energy efficient products and advice,” she said.

Instead of digging through all the sections in a hardware store to find what they want, customers know that all the Outlet’s products are energy-efficient. “And a lot of products we offer you won’t even find in hardware stores,” Heed added.

Some of those products include energy efficient light bulbs in a variety of shapes and wattages, inflatable “chimney pillows” which stop heat loss and drafts through chimneys, strips that shut off power to peripherals when they’re not being used and backpacks that operate as solar energy chargers for cell phones or other small devices.

While the Outlet isn’t able to offer large home appliances, the staff will counsel homeowners on how to do research on energy-efficient refrigerators and washers. CEC staff can also help them find appliance dealers who are knowledgeable about energy-efficient appliances.

In addition to products, the store offer also offers energy audit services. Through these audits, homeowners can see where they’re losing heat and energy and what improvements could be made. Heed said that making small improvements not only makes a home more efficient but can make it more comfortable, for example by making a home less expensive to heat and eliminating drafts.

As of October, the Outlet began offering classes, too, both for business owners and for the general public. Classes are usually held on Wednesday evenings or Saturday mornings. Topics for the general public have included green remodeling and green investing. Classes for owners of commercial buildings have focused on ways to lower utility bills and renewable energy systems for commercial buildings.

Another class was targeted at first-time homebuyers, and the CEC brought in what Heed called an “Eco-broker.”

“The class talked about what to look for in terms of efficiency” when buying

a home, she said. “That’s part of the equation when buying a house as much as how old the appliances are or how many bedrooms it has. You’ll want to know how efficient the house is, and you can ask for an energy audit to be included in the home inspection.”

An important part of the Outlet’s classes and one-on-one education with customers is banishing myths about clean energy and educating the public about misconceptions they may have.

Probably the most subtle but also most common misconception is that clean energy is all about alternative energy systems like solar, geothermal or wind power.

“For some people who come in, the starting point (of their questions or concerns) is the last thing they should be doing,” Reed said. “They’re looking for renewable energy systems for their home, but they still have incandescent light bulbs and aren’t turning them off.”

People often think they need to do something really big and costly to make a positive impact on the environment, but small changes are also important.



Photo by Sarah Rigg

**Deb Heed, Project Manager for the Clean Energy Outlet, which is located at 44 Cross Street, in Ypsilanti.**

## Myths and Misconceptions about Clean Energy, Addressed by the CEC staff:

**Myth:** *Clean and renewable energy is just an issue for liberals.*

**Response:** “The CEC is nonpartisan,” CEC Project Manager Deb Heed says. “We don’t promote one party or another — we promote clean energy. From our perspective, clean energy creates independent communities. In my time working at the Outlet, I’ve seen lots of people from lots of different political stripes. There are a lot of different reasons for being interested in clean energy: reducing your carbon footprint, wanting more independence and not depending on energy companies, saving money on utility bills or wanting to make a “green” statement. As many people show up for our classes driving pick up trucks as driving (hybrid fuel) Priuses.

**Myth:** *Solar isn’t a viable energy source in Michigan.*

**Response:** “Solar works in Michigan, no question,” Heed says. Heed says that installing solar cells on your roof can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and it might be hard to produce enough energy to justify the cost. However, the CEC and other organizations are working on ways to drop the “cost of entry” to using these technologies, and there are tax rebates and other incentives at the local and state level that can help. Other solar energy technologies are more practical, she says. For instance, a solar hot water heater may cost \$5,000 to \$10,000 to install, but homeowners typically see a return on investment within seven to 10 years.

**Myth:** *The best way to “go green” in your home is to install renewable energy systems using solar panels or a wind turbine.*

**Response:** The first step to creating an environmentally friendly home is to make it more energy efficient. Simple lower-cost projects such as updating insulation, switching to compact fluorescent lights and making sure to shut off lights and appliances when you leave home will save energy and money. Even if you ultimately opt for a large renewable energy overhaul in your home, you’ll get “more bang for your buck” if you’ve made your home more energy efficient and have modified your daily habits. “Modest upgrades and behavior changes don’t cost anything,” says CEC Director Sean Reed.

“People come in looking to make a green statement or get off the grid, and they want to talk about solar panels or wind turbines,” Heed said. “We ask, ‘What kind of energy efficiency work have you done in the home?’ A lot of times, they don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Heed said that energy systems are only part of clean energy and added, “Energy efficiency products are a form of clean energy, too.”

She doesn’t discourage people from installing solar panels if they’re interested, but she said those large projects should come last, after other smaller changes are made.

“The more efficient home or lifestyle you’ve created, the less need for solar panels,” she said. “If you get energy efficient, instead of installing three or four panels, you can buy two. The process of getting more energy efficient costs less than renewable energy investments, but it’s not as sexy.”

The CEC doesn’t just advise others; the staff also practices what it preaches in its new space. Heed said the CEC is working with the landlord to improve the space and make it more efficient.

For instance, the office’s bathroom has a low-flow toilet and a faucet aerator that conserve water. When the old furnace died, a 95 percent efficient furnace was installed, and Arbor Spray Foam donated spray foam insulation for the outer walls of the building. The staff has plans to replace the windows with more energy-efficient ones at some point in the future, as well. Currently, CEC staff is only using about half the square-footage in their office, but they have plans to expand into the rest of the space and build larger classrooms. When that expansion happens, dual-flush toilets and other energy-efficient technology will be used.

“Talking to people about this is our passion,” Heed said. “We lovingly call ourselves ‘energy geeks.’”

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Clean Energy Outlet, please call 734-483-9000  
or visit [www.cec-mi.org/](http://www.cec-mi.org/)  
and click on the “Energy Outlet” logo.**

**For more information about energy efficiency tax rebates  
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