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Reluctant entrepreneur hits Wall Street with green fund

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ENCINITAS — Robert Wilder never imagined his academic inclinations would take him to Wall Street. Nevertheless, the Olivenhain resident has found himself there on more than one occasion touting the success of his vision for saving the world.

After years of studying the legal aspects of environmental coastal regulations as well as researching the accumulating affects of land and air pollution on coastal environments, Wilder decided that he needed to focus on the source of the damage rather than the impacts.

In 1999, Wilder and Josh Landis launched a stock index listing 42 clean-energy companies.

In creating WilderHill Clean Energy Index, Wilder intended to show that “green” businesses could be profitable as well as good for the environment. The index is listed on the American Stock Exchange under the symbol ECO.

His hunch proved right on target. Within a short amount of time, the index grew considerably. However, the index was merely a list of companies within a similar field that tracks the strength of a particular business sector.

Wilder saw the potential for greater capitalization and created a clean energy fund in 2005.

The PowerShares Wilder Hill Clean Energy Portfolio — listed under PBW — mirrors the performance of the index. Beginning with \$10 million in capital, the fund has grown to more than \$650 million Wilder said.

“I want to help change the world by creating opportunities to invest in clean energy companies,” he said. Wilder practices what he preaches. His Olivenhain home is solar powered and he anticipates riding in a solar-generated car by next year.

As if this were not achievement enough for the self-described accidental entrepreneur, Wilder launched a second fund this year, WilderHill Progressive Energy, which represents 36 companies that work to reduce pollutants from conventional energy that comes from such fossil fuels as coal, oil and natural gas. Wilder was in New York to ring the bell at the American Stock Exchange Oct. 24, officially opening the trading day.

After the recent election, the average volume of the fund is around a half-million shares per day, Wilder said. "I believe in ecological solutions that make economic sense," he said.

On a national level, Wilder seeks to create a viable economic alternative to foreign oil dependence. "I don't understand our (country's) blind eye we have to our addiction to oil," he said. By exposing companies that use alternative energy sources that create less waste to the market, Wilder said his fund has the potential to make a difference in the way policymakers think about "green solutions."

"This isn't just for the green investor," Wilder said.

Locally, Wilder envisions Encinitas as a leader in economically viable, environmentally sound solutions.

"We can act locally and regionally to make a difference," he said.

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Wilder continues to live by example.

Through a link on his site WilderShares.com, visitors are invited to view how much energy in his home is used compared to how much he is creating using solar power. The excess energy flows to SDG&E, which credits him for the hours when he needs to use its power. Wilder's vision of sustainable growth through alternative, clean-energy sources seems to be catching on at the state level. Through government incentives, new home builders in California and several other states are encouraged to install solar panels. "These ideas are working, we are changing," Wilder said.

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