

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Dianna M. Náñez

If green-collar jobs are the wave of the future, Congressman Harry Mitchell wants Arizona to be first in line for the economic benefits of that budding industry.

On Thursday, Mitchell, D-Tempe, toured two Tempe businesses that market solar energy locally and internationally and a Tempe bus-operations center that is recognized for its environmentally-conscious construction. He visited with business leaders and city officials to get a better understanding of Arizona's potential as a green-industry leader and how stimulus funding and future legislation could help speed that role.

"This money is supposed to help create jobs," he said. "I want to get an idea of whether that is happening. I think it is obvious from these (businesses) that it is."

The energy provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act are touted to create at least 500,000 jobs. Portions of the funding are targeted at increasing the nation's renewable energy production and making public buildings more energy efficient.

Larry Polizzotto, vice president of First Solar's investor relations, schooled Mitchell on the Tempe company's solar-panel technology and skyrocketing growth.

Since the First Solar opened in 2002 it has grown from 200 employees to 4,000. About 1,000 of those employees are in the U.S. The company has a plant in Germany, which has become an international leader in the wind-and-solar energy industry. Germany's second largest export is wind turbines and it exports nearly half of the world's solar panels.

While incentives for renewable energy have prompted Germany's transition to that industry, Polizzotto told Mitchell that the U.S. market has also expanded. From 2003 to March 2009, First Solar produced and installed 1 gigawatt of solar electricity. In the coming year alone, the

company expects to produce 1.1 gigawatts.

"What's happened to the solar market here in the U.S. in just one year is really just remarkable," he said.

First Solar is working with California utilities to install its panels in open fields and on top of buildings to increase the state's renewable-energy sources.

Kathy Weiss, First Solar's vice president for government affairs, said that Arizona's sun could be harvested into a gold mine for the state.

"As renewable energy becomes a larger industry for the U.S . . . you'd be able to generate that energy here and sell it on the West Coast. That would be an economic (driver) for Arizona," she said.

At American Solar Electric, a Tempe-based business that markets its solar panels primarily to businesses and the residential market, Sean Seitz, American Solar's co-owner and president, told Mitchell that his business is also growing.

Seitz boasted of a partnership with Shea Homes to include solar-power systems in some housing developments. At Arizona Shea Trilogy communities in Peoria, Queen Creek and Pinal County, solar-power systems are included as a standard feature on about 50 homes. The company has installed at least 1,000 solar-electric systems throughout the state.

Seitz said that the demand for solar power is growing in the Southwest as the public begins to better understand the technology's environmental and economic benefits.

American Solar is attributing some of the increased demand for solar power to federal legislation that passed last year. The Solar Investment Tax Credit allows a taxpayer to claim a credit of 30 percent of qualified expenditures for a solar-electric system. That credit was

previously capped at \$2,000.

"It's really become affordable. We're hiring more workers to handle that demand," Seitz said.

At Tempe's East Valley Bus Operations and Maintenance facility, Mitchell saw the federal funding the city invested in the center, which services Tempe, Phoenix and Scottsdale buses. The facility uses alternative fuel for its buses, low-flow plumbing fixtures and waterless urinals to save more than 168,000 gallons of water annually and natural light in nearly all its office space.

Tempe is using nearly \$6.5 million stimulus funds to improve the facility, expanding the parking area with shade canopies, placing solar panels on top of the parking shade structures and upgrading the alternative fueling capacity.