

ALBANY September 12, 2007

Energy is hot topic at “science café”

By BOB CONNER Gazette Reporter

The “science café” movement came to Albany on Tuesday, when about 30 people gathered at the fashionable Noche night spot on north Broadway to talk about energy independence.

At least that was what Lili Kelly, organizer of the event, announced as the topic as she introduced the featured speaker, Dr. Nag Patibandla, director of the Center for Future Energy Systems at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who grew up in rural India in a home without electricity or running water.

But Patibandla immediately contradicted her. “There is no such thing as energy independence,” he said.

That was fine by Kelly, fitting in with the idea of the evening, which was to encourage informal conversation about a scientific topic.

Patibandla, a former General Electric Co. researcher and a former employee of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, said he preferred to talk about enhancing energy security. He suggested various steps that could be taken, including mundane ones such as encouraging the sale of diesel cars. He also praised sewage plant projects in Niskayuna and Schenectady that make use of methane gas for generating heat and electricity.

The diesel discussion came from a question, one of a number from people who seemed knowledgeable or at least opinionated. One man said America’s rail and telephone networks are now “kept alive by subsidy and Regulation” and wondered how long the electric grid would survive without them.

There were young people in attendance who have not been in the area long but heard about the event through e-mail contacts. They included Amy Wilkinson, a New York State Museum employee who was drinking Guinness and said she had been to similar events in Boulder, Colo., and Adam Grossman, 25, who was frustrated that he did not get a question in.

Noche plans to become a “science lounge” on the second Tuesday of every month, and future speakers will include representatives from the State Museum and the University at Albany.

Kelly said in an e-mail that “Our group is really just a new node in an international network of science cafés that was first established in the late ‘90s in the UK (see www.sciencecafes.org and www.cafescientifique.org). The founder’s idea was to bring science out of the classroom or laboratory and into a more relaxed informal environment where people could talk with an expert about a topic in the news or just a really compelling and fascinating area of research.”

She said she read an article about the movement, discovered Albany did not have its own science café and decided to start one.

Kelly was director of educational programs for the Sciencenter in Ithaca and now works for the state Senate but said her involvement with the science café project is as a volunteer.

The topic of the Oct. 9 meeting has not yet been decided. People should check the Noche Web site (www.nochealbany.com) for more information, Kelly said.