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## Venture visionary has deep roots in cleantech

### Ira Ehrenpreis of Technology Partners will serve as keynote speaker at awards celebration

By David Lewis

How fitting it is that the first Colorado Cleantech Awards Celebration should be addressed by the man at the summit of venture capital investment in the industry.

Ira Ehrenpreis, general partner with Palo Alto- based Technology Partners, transformed cleantech. He shattered the lens through which VC and later other investors saw the industry largely through his fund's investments in cleantech, when it was still called "alternative energy."



Along the way Ehrenpreis' breakthroughs have been recognized fittingly by his service of seven consecutive years as chairman of the Clean-Tech Investor Summit.

Over on the VC side, he serves on the boards of both the National Venture Capital Association and the Western Association of Venture Capitalists, and as co-chairman of both the VCNetwork and the Young Venture Capital Association.

Those are all on Ehrenpreis' VC side. On the cleantech industry side, his fund's gleaming portfolio boasts investments in leading-edge companies long before they had appeared on other VC's desktop dashboards.

One prescient-seeming investment is Loveland-based Abound Solar, which was founded on ideas developed at Colorado State University. Just before this Independence Day, President Obama announced the federal stimulus program would afford Abound a \$400 million loan guarantee to support its manufacturing expansion.

What's happening in the cleantech industry as we reach the end of 2010? Ehrenpreis' Oct. 19 keynote address at the Denver Marriott, "The State of the Cleantech Industry," promises to bring the global view down to Earth.

To put that another way, with no sweeping federal energy or climate policy or legal change on the horizon, and continuing tight financial markets, why bet on cleantech? And will it continue to be a good bet for Colorado?

His response: Forget the critics. Forget the naysayers. Cleantech is being driven by forces that never existed before, so forget the comparisons to other eras when the industry faltered.

"The question people always ask me to talk about is, how did this go from a relatively niche sector, a small sector that only captured a very small percentage of venture capital dollars, to becoming the fastest-growing area of the venture asset class?" Ehrenpreis says.

His argument in part is that the key drivers that have led to this transformation in the sector are the same ones that could power it through current obstacles. Cleantech has moved from obscurity to the mainstream, "But there are challenges," he cautions. "Let us not ignore those challenges."

Yet, "There is such an enormous opportunity to transform the world from a fossil-fuel infrastructure to a renewable infrastructure in the 21st century, that there ends up being a foundational platform to invest in over many decades," Ehrenpreis says.

"Notwithstanding the pitfalls, notwithstanding the critics, notwithstanding the challenges this is becoming the greatest economic opportunity of the 21st century," Ehrenpreis adds.

Ehrenpreis appears to enjoy his work, by the way.

"As a venture capitalist backing transformative technologies and innovations, our job essentially is to leapfrog the status quo," he says.

"I have spent my life backing passionate, capable entrepreneurs who have ideas and the ability to leapfrog the infrastructures and technologies that we all think define energy today and are instead building and innovating our way to an entirely new infrastructure.

Ehrenpreis, by the way, discounts contentions pro and con about global warming in his appraisal of the cleantech sector.

“Most of us who are investors invest for a whole host of reasons,” he notes, “and in some ways the debate around climate change, which many of us consider to be a very real debate, at this point nonetheless is a red herring in some ways, a distraction from the more important point that we are backing technologies that enable better ways to power the 21st century economy.”

Ehrenpreis comes to Colorado as a man who knows a great deal about the Centennial State and the state of cleantech here.

“I have a cleantech investment in Colorado, and I look at cleantech deals in Colorado, so I already understand the importance of Colorado to the cleantech ecosystem,” he says.

In fact, “If you combine the fact that Colorado already has probably more than 300 cleantech companies with its being home to NREL, the largest national lab devoted to renewable energy research and development, and with the intellectual infrastructure of the University of Colorado, CSU, the Colorado School of Mines focused on cleantech research and development – I consider Colorado to be one of the epicenters of cleantech.”

Technology Partners in fact “has a strategic focus to develop investing in more companies in Colorado. With the national lab and the universities, Colorado has the intellectual infrastructure, it has the focus already. The human capital in Colorado is something that I want to partner my financial capital with,” Ehrenpreis concludes.

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