



# John Heimlich:

## Farmer Ready for Small Town Energy Revolution

By Candace Gwaltney

**W**hen lifelong Reynolds resident and farmer John Heimlich first heard about the state's BioTown initiative, he didn't know what to think. As president of the White County commissioners, Heimlich learned about the plan through a letter from the Indiana Department of Agriculture in the summer of 2005.

"It (the letter) was kind of laying out this BioTown initiative. I wasn't quite sure what to make of that – whether that was for real or not. A week or two later we (the state) had that meeting here and found out that it was on the up and up. It's been quite an experience."

The Purdue graduate farms about 1,000 acres of land, raising corn and soybeans. He quickly became a believer in BioTown, now driving a flex-fuel pickup truck and serving as president of the BioTown Development Authority.

**BizVoice®:** Tell us about the BioTown Development Authority.

**John Heimlich:** "When the announcement was first made, I was contacted as the president of the county commissioners and was asked to put together a group. So I had people from the county council, from the town of Reynolds, Honey Creek Township – which Reynolds is a part of – the economic development organization (and) Purdue Extension service. That group kind of became an unofficial steering committee early on. As time went on we realized that we were making decisions that we had no authority to make, and we needed some sort of entity formed."

**BV:** As BioTown Development Authority president, you were part of the Indiana delegation that visited Germany's version of BioTown. Talk about that experience.

**JH:** "We spent a couple days in Berlin meeting with the people from their ag ministry, had a meeting with three members from the German parliament ag committee, their bio-energy initiative organization. Then we took a train to Juehnde, which is what they call Bioenergiedorf, which is Bioenergytown. This was a town roughly the size of Reynolds, maybe a little bigger, about 750 (people) I think, that had decided in the mid to late '90s that something they wanted was to make the town run on bio-renewable energy. It actually started in 1998. In 2006, they had pretty much realized their goal. ...

"They had a collection system where someone would come around and collect the animal waste once a week from each of these farms, and then they had this facility on one end of the town where they had digesters set up. ... Plus, they had some silage from a crop they grew there that they also fed into the digester. (It) made methane gas and generated electricity. It was going back onto the (power)

grid, but they were producing more electricity than the town was consuming.”

**BV:** What did you learn from that experience in Germany that you are applying to BioTown?

**JH:** “Well, one thing that we’re trying to impress upon people here (who) get impatient when things don’t happen right away is that it did take eight years there. We’re in the third year here since the governor’s announcement. So, we’re still on schedule.”

He was also impressed with how the German town used scrap woodchips burned in a boiler system to produce heat for residents’ homes. Reynolds should take that example and look at using other sources of waste materials to produce energy, he adds.

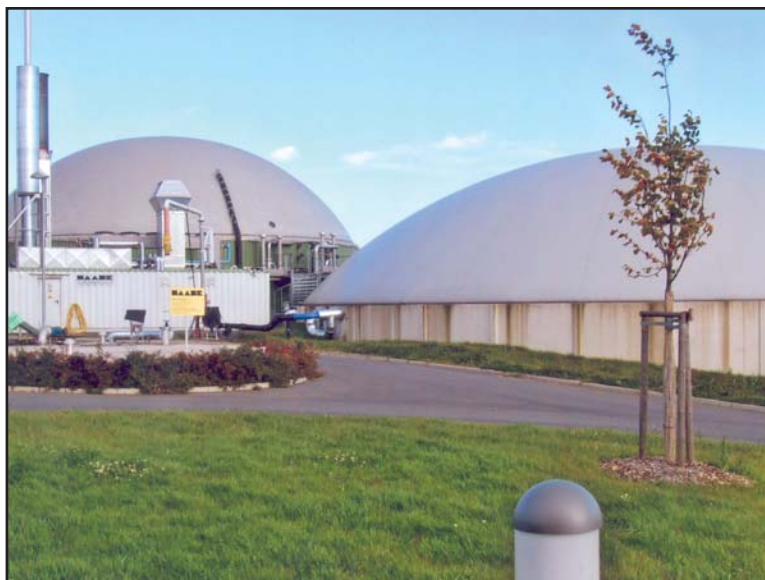
“It was interesting too, especially in the meetings in Berlin and in the meetings in Juehnde, it seemed like people over there were surprised anybody here in the United States was even concerned at all about alternative energy. Their vision of Americans was they just want to drive SUVs, burn as much gas as they can and not worry about it.”

**BV:** Things are moving a little slower with BioTown compared to the timeline originally set out by the state. How do you try to tell people to be patient because this is an ongoing effort?

**JH:** “Really, you can say that, but I think until we have something concrete there on the ground there is still going to be those doubts. But I think we’re very close to everything. I think we’re close to getting this (next) phase going.”

**BV:** Why are you so passionate about BioTown and renewable fuels?

**Anaerobic digesters in Juehnde, Germany, produce energy from manure and other farm waste. Heimlich was a part of an Indiana delegation to visit that country’s Bioenergy Village in 2007.**



**John Heimlich (second from right) discusses the latest progress at a BioTown Development Authority meeting in April.**

**JH:** “Well, I guess a number of reasons. Going back to the Germany trip, I think one of the differences maybe between Europeans and here ... everything over there was more based on the environment. ... I think over here it’s more economic, what the price of fuel goes to. When gas goes to \$4, people get excited and (say) we need to look at something different. When gas was a dollar a gallon, why, you can’t get anybody excited about alternative fuel.

“I think the war on terror, Iraq, things like that, have also gotten people to think that if we weren’t so dependent on oil we could come to peace, and we wouldn’t have to be involved in places like that.

“Along with that, I am convinced we have to start looking at alternatives and can’t just rely on oil forever. We need to start looking in other directions. And, as a county commissioner, I think that rural America and many places today are having a rough time economically. The manufacturing jobs have left and I think with a move toward a revolution so to speak in alternative energy ... rural America could be a major player in an economic revitalization.”

**BV:** How has the community changed since it was christened BioTown?

**JH:** “You know, a lot of people around the country know where Reynolds is now. That sure wasn’t the case before. It’s amazing how many people around the country have heard of BioTown. We get inquiries, the economic development director gets inquiries from companies or entrepreneurs that have this or that idea that they think would fit into BioTown. You don’t know, some of them may not amount to anything, but some may.”

**BV:** What’s the best part of living in Reynolds?

**JH:** “It’s small town America. It’s not Chicago or Indianapolis. If that’s what you like – the hustle and bustle – why, it’s probably not for you. But the people here like more of the laid-back atmosphere and knowing your neighbors; people looking out for one another.”

He laughs and adds: “Some people would say that’s the bad part of it – everybody knows everybody’s business.”