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# Area firms, organizations turning to solar power to reduce costs

By **Richard Lee**  
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Ron French will hope for a stretch of sunny days when his crew installs a solar voltaic system next month on the roof of R.C. Bigelow Co. in Fairfield.

The time couldn't be better for Connecticut companies to install electricity-generating photovoltaic solar systems, according to French, a Wilton resident and president of Solar Works Inc., which has been selling renewable energy equipment since 1980.

Bigelow has received a \$777,000 grant from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund to defray about 55 percent of installation costs for a 171-kilowatt solar photovoltaic system at its

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headquarters.

The system will supply about 195,600 kilowatt-hours annually, or 6.7 percent of the tea company's electrical needs.

It will be the third-largest solar installation in the state, French said, trailing those at a Staples distribution facility in Killingly and a Whole Foods operation in

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take about two weeks, French said.

French said he expects more Connecticut companies to follow Bigelow's lead.

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"This is a long-term trend. It's a hedge against future rate increases," French said. "With state and federal financial support, the economics are attractive. The CCEF generally supports about half the cost."

The federal government provides a 30 percent tax credit based on the cost of commercial projects, as well as the opportunity to allow for depreciation.

Bigelow is continually examining possible sustainable energy efforts in its business operations, said Co-president Cindi Bigelow.

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"This solar project is just one more example of how we are trying to be more environmentally friendly," she said. "We could not be more pleased to have partnered with the town of Fairfield and their 'Green Talks' to help spread the word of what each person can do to make environmentally responsible choices."

Bigelow has invited Gov. M. Jodi Rell to a ceremony in late summer to mark the installation of the panels.

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"The cost of electricity is going to climb. This is a way for us to control our own destiny," said Dean Hearst, vice president of manufacturing at Bigelow.

Bigelow has shown its desire to be an environmental steward through its involvement with Fairfield's Clean Energy Task Force and its energy efficiency and conservation measures, said the state fund's President Lise Dondy.

"There has been an explosion of demand for solar," she said. "Last month, we approved four commercial applications for solar, and two or three are going to the board this month."

The reason for the increase can be attributed to environmental consciousness, as well as the rising cost of electricity, Dondy said, adding that the state's utility rate-payers fund the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund.

Montpelier, Vt.-based Solar Works, which has its operations and warehousing facility in Stamford, has installed systems at many residences in the region and more than 100 schools in the Northeast.

One of its latest projects is a 27.6-kilowatt photovoltaic system on the roof of a building at New Canaan Country School. The school has received a \$126,000 grant to defray about half the installation cost.

Solar Works is finishing the installation of a 20.91-kilowatt solar photovoltaic system at the Westport Fire Department and Emergency Response Center on the Post Road. The system is expected to supply 6.9 percent of the station's electricity needs.

The company recently installed a system on a building that houses Tibbetts Real Estate and the law firm of Tibbetts, Keating & Butler LLC in



Darien.

"I'm enthusiastic about it," building owner Judy Tibbetts said. "It sets you back in the beginning, but there are tax deductions. You're supposed to have payback in five years."

Leadership in solar technology has come from California, French said, but many of the Northeastern states also have been at the forefront.

"There's not been a national energy policy that reflects the solar industry," French said. "States like Florida, Texas and New Mexico don't have a solar industry, which doesn't make any sense."

Manufacturing improvements will continue to reduce the cost of solar systems, but it may be some time before the technology becomes a major industry in the United States, he said.

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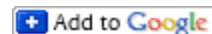
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