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COMMUTER CENTRAL

Top Stories**A light at the tunnel's end**

BY JORDAN FENSTER, Editor

02/28/2008

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Easton is only steps away from joining the growing group of green-minded communities in Connecticut.

Last year, the town embarked on a quest to meet the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund's "20 percent by 2010" challenge, in which a community commits to pulling 20 percent of its municipal power usage from clean energy sources by the year 2010. Nearly 12 months later, the first phase of that quest is nearly complete.

The challenge, as Cathy Alfandre of Easton's Clean Energy Task Force explained, requires involvement from both the municipality and households in the town. And that relationship is reciprocal: For every 100 households that sign up with energy provider UI to receive all their power from clean energy sources, the town earns one free solar panel.

And they're almost there.

"We're now at 92 signups," Alfandre said.

Though the task force got started last March, much of the work began in November. Easton, being the small community it is, can be difficult to canvas, and task force personnel took advantage of the crowds at the polls during election time to talk about the issue with residents.

Since then, progress has been steady, but the response, Alfandre said, has been encouraging. If 92 signups in a year seems a small number, keep in mind that Easton is comprised of only 2,400 households, total.

"We've gotten a really positive reception," she said.

The switch to clean power does come at a cost to residents. The added fee works out to 1.1 cents per kilowatt hour, or about \$8 a month per household.

"In the scheme of things it is a small price to pay," Alfandre said.

Once the goal of 100 households is achieved, Easton will receive, free of charge, a 2 kilowatt solar panel - although Easton's small size will work in the town's benefit. One hundred signups means more than 2.5 percent of the town will have gotten on the bandwagon, "Which means we're eligible for an extra kilowatt," Alfandre said.

That 3 kilowatt solar panel will "produce some electrical benefit," Alfandre said.

According to Bob Wall, who works with the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund and helped Easton begin the process, a "conservative estimate" puts that solar panel's power output at 3,600 kilowatts per hour each year.

"It's relatively small for the purposes of a school, for example," he said.

But those hours add up. A "ballpark estimate" of a municipality's power cost is \$.15 per kilowatt hour - some residential UI customers pay close to \$.25 - so over the course of a year, the savings to the town may not be negligible.

Power "can be quite pricey," Wall said.

And the hope is that once town residents realize the program's worth, the response will grow by leaps and bounds. The benefit, Alfandre said, is not only economical and environmental, but also educational.

"Our feeling is that it's a self-fulfilling thing," she said. "My hope is that people will get excited about it."



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