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lehigh valley **style** INVESTIGATES:

SO, WHY SOLAR?

At School, at Work, at Home

THE STATE OF SOLAR ENERGY USE IN THE VALLEY

by lisa j. gotto

With weather events like Superstorm Sandy and record temperature highs being broken season after season, it is no longer reasonable to just ponder whether or not global warming exists. Mother Nature is telling us now with regularity that it does. The good news is that we are finally convinced that it is time to take action. Alternative ways to produce energy are being explored and then adapted right here in the Valley.

Why solar? Actually, it's not just solar energy development that is increasing in popularity; it is all kinds of alternative energy methods, which is good news as long as both the up- and down sides of each method are thoughtfully examined for impact.

"The renewable energy field is growing very quickly," says John Costlow, Director of

Technical Services of the Sustainable Energy Fund (SEF), Allentown.

Growing so rapidly, he says, that it is difficult to provide clear numbers as to how many local residents and businesses are taking advantage of the alternatives. What we do know for sure from records attributed to Pennsylvania's Alternative Energy Credit Program is that solar energy generation methods far exceed other methods of alternative energy production.

THINKING IT THROUGH

After kicking the idea of generating energy via wind turbine around for a year, Chick and Elisabeth Leibig of Saylorsburg, later decided that solar was the way to go for them and their centuries-old farmhouse.

"We even had some people from Lehigh University come out to do a survey on our property, but something just didn't seem right about it for us," Chick says. "There were too many moving parts." That and the fact that they weren't entirely satisfied with the type of warranty that came with the turbine option convinced them that they needed to investigate the solar method.

The Leibigs took advantage of a state-funded initiative called the Pennsylvania Sunshine Program. The program, which kicked-off in 2009, provided an initial investment of \$24 million to residents and businesses for solar projects across the state. The early birds definitely caught the worms in this scenario, as by August 19, 2011 program applications were wait-listed according to Costlow at the SEF.



The solar array on the Merle-Smith Campus of Moravian Academy.

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Probably the first question that comes to mind when considering implementing a solar energy system is the initial cost outlay versus the savings generated and recouped over time.

"All consumers can utilize renewable energy resources, and in many areas the levelized cost of the resource is less than current electricity, petroleum and propane prices," Costlow says.

The Leibigs received a total of \$3,795 toward their initial investment of \$35,000 for their solar system, which provides energy to heat and light their home. (They have since added a system to provide for the solar heating of water in the summer months.) The \$35,000 cost covered all necessary upgrades to the existing electric system and permits associated with the installation prior to the addition of the water heating system.

"...at least **75%** of our new home clients inquire about the feasibility of installing solar PV or solar thermal..."

Another reason the Leibigs went the solar route was because their contractor was able to provide them with an aerial view of their property during the proposal period that showed how optimally situated their buildings were to capture energy from the sun.

According to Brian Baker, Owner and Director of Marketing and Design for Studio26 Homes in Orefield, the Leibigs will attain the break-even point with their investment in seven and a half years. This includes the savings the couple will accrue in electricity and fuel costs over the period, plus the federal income tax credit the Leibigs are entitled to annually until they reach the cap for the federal program.

Baker says the PA Sunshine Rebate Program was certainly responsible for more homeowners being able to afford to make the switch to the cleaner-burning power of the sun.

"Over the last few years when the PA Sunshine Rebate Program was still robust, there certainly was a lot of solar thermal (generating domestic hot water from the sun's energy) and photovoltaic, or PV, (generating electricity from the sun's energy) activity here around the Valley," Baker says.

He also relayed at the time of this interview that there was recent news out of Harrisburg



A 9.45 kW pole-mounted solar PV installation on a residential property.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2004, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a law that required the state's utility companies to acquire an increasing percentage of their electricity via solar voltaics over a 15-year period beginning in 2007. The mandate is officially referred to as Pennsylvania's Solar Share. In the first year of the mandate, 2007, utility companies were required to increase their generation of electricity via solar by 1,981 megawatt hours or MWh. In the current year, 2013, the requirement will be 88,605 MWh. In the final year of the mandate, 2021, the requirement will increase to 1,036,024 MWh.

Pennsylvania's Solar Share is among the most aggressive initiatives in the nation, requiring the installation of more than 860 MW of solar PV over the next 15 years.

Pennsylvania state government is leading by example by acquiring nearly 30 percent of its energy to operate via renewable energy sources.

that more funds have been made available to the program. "I think most of those funds will go to applicants currently wait-listed, though," Baker says. He is, however, encouraged that many clients request information about equipping their new homes with solar systems.

"I'd say that at least 75 percent of our new home clients inquire about the feasibility of installing solar PV or solar thermal as part of the design/construction of their new custom home," Baker says. "As a matter of fact, since its relative affordability is generally higher than solar PV, we have been including solar hot water systems as a standard on almost all our homes in recent

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(According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's website, the PA Sunshine program received a total of \$7.25 million in additional funding from the Commonwealth Financing Authority in late January 2013.)

Karen and Leo Eddinger also recently made the move to solar for their three-bedroom ranch house in Northampton but contemplated which alternative energy source best suited their needs for over a year prior to installation.

"We thought the timing was perfect for installation with the rebates and government incentives [currently available]," Karen says. The Eddingers decided from the start to have both an electric and hot water solar system installed. Prior to incentives, the cost of the photovoltaic system (electric) was \$29,870 and \$12,405 after. The cost of the solar hot water system was \$9,920 before incentives and \$4,945 after rebate, for a total project savings of \$22,440. (Please note: these prices were consistent with rates in 2009 and current prices may differ.)

The best part, Karen says, was that the process of application and installation was a relatively easy one. Karen had just one word of caution:

"The only downfall was the state of Pennsylvania gave us a [tax form] 1099 for the rebate we received and in turn we had to pay federal tax on that rebate," Karen says.

So it is best to make sure you are aware of all the financial implications prior to going into the process.

HOW SOLAR PV WORKS

- 1 The photovoltaic cells or solar array panel consists of semiconductor devices that convert solar energy to direct current (DC) electricity
- 2 An inverter converts direct current to alternating current; DC to AC
- 3 A solar meter is used to measure the energy generated from the solar array
- 4 The electricity generated powers your home (if not consumed in the home at any given time, the power can be sent back to the electrical grid providing equal credit on your electric bill)



The scope of Moravian Academy's solar array as seen from the air.

AN EDUCATION IN SOLAR

In the earlier months of 2012 if you were driving Route 22 between Routes 191 and 33, it was difficult not to notice the activity taking place on a piece of Moravian Academy property in Bethlehem Township.

This was not another housing development going up on repurposed farmland. Those first rod-like structures protruding from the ground were not the beginnings of home foundations of any sort, rather the preliminary supports to a ground-mounted system of solar panels; 4,532 panels covering seven acres to be exact.

Each of the **4,532** photovoltaic panels is rated at **285** watts for a total of **1.29** megawatts.

In November of 2012, the power from these panels was switched on and Moravian Academy's Merle-Smith Campus began to generate a portion of its own power to run operations on the 120-acre campus which accommodates its Upper School students and a host of extracurricular activities.

This solar array is one of several ways Moravian Academy is addressing their ambitious and ongoing environmentally sustaining initiatives according to John Weber, CFO of Moravian Academy. Weber was integral in the application process required to tap into the \$24 million of state-sanctioned funds for the development of solar energy across Pennsylvania.

The school was awarded a total of \$1.36 million toward the purchase and installation of its photovoltaic system. Moravian worked with Bethlehem-based energy and environmental consulting firm, The Stone House Group and the Philadelphia Area Independent School Business

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Officer Association (PAISBOA) to find the contractor, Hudson Energy Solar, who financed and installed the system.

Moravian Academy is one of a number of schools that took advantage of state and federally based initiatives over the last few years. Other schools participating in these programs include: James Buchanan Elementary, Spring Garden Elementary, Freedom High School and East Hills Middle School—all are part of the Bethlehem Area School District.

Businesses are also eligible for incentives and some of our largest corporations are among the local enterprises that have applied for program grant money. They include Crayola Inc., Air Products and Chemicals, Inc. and Nestle Waters North America, Inc.

So, why solar? Clearly, there are benefits to be gained as we become more educated in alternative energy initiatives and traverse a future both locally and globally that requires a more thoughtful approach to the use of our valuable resources. **S**

GET INVOLVED

Want to educate yourself or get involved in our local alternative energy initiatives?

The Sustainable Energy Fund (SEF) hosts an Energypath Power Lunch on the second Thursday of every month at the Green Energy Center at 1005 Brookside Road in Lower Macungie Township. Each month a sustainable energy topic is explored and a free lunch is available.

Other monthly meetings by:
Lehigh Valley Association of Energy Engineers
610.390.6267

Mid-Atlantic Renewable Energy Association
themarea.org

Green Drinks, Lehigh Valley
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Please call or visit their websites for meeting times and dates.

S Visit lehighvalleystyle.com to learn more about what else Moravian Academy is doing to lessen its environmental impact.

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