

MAKING ELECTRICITY AND SAVING MONEY, TOO



T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR

Jacques Marchetti, left, designed a solar power system that homeowner and business partner Raul Batallas installed at his home in Fitchburg.

Solar looking up

By Martin Luttrell
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Program providing rebates

You can't turn back the hands of time, but Raul Batallas does enjoy watching his electric meter spin backward.

The electrical contractor installed solar panels on the roof of his home in Fitchburg last month. In addition to providing power for him, it reduces how much he owes his electric company.

Mr. Batallas, who works with solar systems designer Jacques Marchetti of Marchetti Engineering in Fitch-

burg, said the installation will have another benefit: It was approved by the state, qualifying him to install solar systems under the Commonwealth Solar program, which offers rebates to property owners who install solar power systems.

He is one of a growing number of contractors getting into the solar installation business, with the launch last year of Commonwealth Solar. According to Phil Giudice,

commissioner of the state Division of Energy Resources, there were 51 solar installers scattered around the state prior to the January 2008 launch of Commonwealth Solar. With business increased because of a combination of state rebates and federal tax credits, there now are 154 contractors, he said.

Mr. Batallas points to his own 4-kilowatt system as an example of why there is a surge in inquiries into

solar systems. When his two-family home is not using all the power generated by the 20 solar power modules on the roof, the excess goes to the electrical grid, deducting the amount owned on his electric bill, he said.

"I can see my electric meter turn backwards," he said. "It feels really good. I've been here 12 years, and I've seen only (rate) increases."

Mr. Batallas' system would cost a homeowner \$36,000, including installation, Mr. Batallas said. His application to the state was approved, and he

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received a \$21,000 rebate under the Commonwealth Solar program, along with a \$3,000 federal tax deduction that is part of the federal stimulus plan, he said. He expects the system to pay for itself.

Commonwealth Solar is funded through surcharges on residents' monthly electric bills. The \$17 million allotted to the program this year is part of \$47.5 million allocated for renewable energy initiatives through the Renewable Energy Trust surcharge.

The program is expected to meet the first phase of Gov. Deval L. Patrick's goal of installing 250 megawatts of solar photovoltaic panels by 2017. The rebate program is expected to bring 27 megawatts to the market by 2012. Further, it will substantially increase solar business development in the state, according to the Division of Energy Resources.

To date, the program has awarded rebates for 662 residential and commercial projects totaling 7,846 kilowatts, and \$24.4 million in rebates. The average rebates cover about 40 percent of the project costs. Some 298 of those projects have been installed, according to the state.

Mr. Giudice said that solar systems are expensive, but increased solar production and installation will bring costs down. He estimated that solar power will reach so-called grid parity pricing with conventionally produced electricity in five to 10 years.

Winston Vaughan, field organizer for Environment Massachusetts, an environmental advocacy organization affiliated with Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, said Commonwealth Solar is contributing to the growth of solar energy, but said it is difficult to measure its impact.

"Given the amount of focus and resources going to green technology, it's hard to look at one program in a vacuum," he said. "We also have the Green

Communities Act and Clean Energies funded under the stimulus plan. We have a wonderful confluence on renewable energy."

Howard Belsky, of Second Generation Energy in Hopedale, has installed several systems in the state, and he said that the Commonwealth Solar program has made solar installation more affordable.

"Due to the great incentives, I've had a great amount of (customer) interest," he said. "Due to the tough economic times, even with rebates, people have to come up with cash, and disposable cash that people had is going to living expenses and college funds."

"We're very busy, but it should be at a point where we can't handle the calls."

Only grid-tie systems, which transfer excess solar power into the electrical grid, are approved for the rebate. Homeowners should check with their utility to make sure it participates in the program. For more information, go online to the www.masstech.org/solar.