

Local News

Forum points out growing possibilities for solar energy

BY DARIN WIPPERMAN
courierreporter@salmonpress.com

BETHLEHEM — Hosting a forum on the benefits of solar energy seemed like a natural move for the White Mountain School. With a historic interest in energy conservation and the environment, the school attracted dozens of people who learned about solar energy last Thursday morning.

Rob Constantine, WMS Director of Finance and Advancement, welcomed the group to the solar forum. The school and its board of trustees, Constantine said, are “very interested in the sustainability of our operations.”

WMS hosted a biomass heating forum last November. The school made a significant investment in replacing heating oil with wood fuel in recent years.

A large array of solar panels is about to be installed on the roof of the school’s new Catherine Houghton Arts Center. A total of 45 kilowatts of panels will soon be producing an estimated 60,000 kilowatt hours of electricity annually.

As Constantine said, the new arts center was “planned for solar.” Last week, the racks for

the panels were in place, with the panels soon to follow.

Elizabeth Aldrich, the Sustainability Studies department head at WMS, discussed the process to finance the solar panel project. Non-profits like WMS cannot take advantage of the 30 percent federal tax credit for solar systems, she said.

As a result, WMS worked with SunRaise Investments to fund the panels. WMS has entered into a power purchase agreement for use of the energy.

As the investor, SunRaise will own the panels under the power purchase agreement. The company will therefore receive any applicable tax credits and refunds.

Regarding the agreement and the solar project, Aldrich said, “We’re so thrilled it’s happening.”

With the large array of solar panels, she added, “We will be creating more electricity than the building uses.”

Information presented at the solar forum showed that the use of the solar panels at the arts center will save approximately 775,000 pounds of coal over 30 years.

Aldrich said panels older than 30 years old are still producing energy in the country.

Other presentations at the solar forum noted the improved economics that make solar a better investment. Previously, high system costs made the idea of using solar energy less appealing.

New England is actually the second worst region in the country for solar energy production, next to the Pacific Northwest. The Southwest, in areas like Arizona and Nevada, is the sunniest part of the country, according to data presented at the forum.

Nonetheless, New

England’s high electricity rates improve the attractiveness of alternative sources like solar. A national study even showed New Hampshire as one of the few states where solar energy is cheaper than the electric grid after factoring in a variety of data points, including system costs and the projected rise in electricity rates.

As presenter Clay Mitchell, from UNH, said, “If you’re sitting around waiting to put in a solar array, you’re losing money.”

New technologies are also improving the costs of solar systems. Mitchell continued, “This is



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Elizabeth Aldrich, right, director of the Sustainability Studies program at the White Mountain School, discussed the partnership between WMS and SunRaise, a firm that helps non-profits make use of renewable energy. Patrick Jackson of SunRaise is also pictured.

not a complacent industry.”

Pat Jackson, a representative from SunRaise, echoed Mitchell’s

point. Regarding use of solar energy, he said, “Now it’s the right thing to do, and it’s cost effective.”