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Todd Thayer taking in the sun on the Orleans Marketplace rooftop



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SUNPOWER

HARNESSING SOLAR RAYS FOR HOME & BUSINESS

Written by Susan Spencer

CAPE COD MIGHT NOT BE SUN-DRENCHED LIKE THE SOUTHWEST, BUT MORE PEOPLE ARE TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT SOLAR POWER FOR CLEAN ENERGY. "WE ACTUALLY HAVE A GOOD RESOURCE FOR SOLAR," SAYS LUKE HINKLE, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF MY GENERATION ENERGY IN SOUTH DENNIS. "IT'S THE COOL, SUNNY SUMMER DAYS THAT MAKE PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS WORK MOST EFFICIENTLY."

A confluence of factors prompted Hinkle, who has a Ph.D. in physics and consults for the high-tech industry, to start his clean energy installation business two years ago. First, he saw a need for someone to navigate the policies and paperwork of installing energy systems. Second, he observed that renewable energy was just about the only thing that competing political candidates agreed on. And third, a friend with whom he had discussed going into business, who was just two years older, died suddenly of a heart attack. "If I only had two



Top left: Mechanical Installer, Jerry Evans mounting solar rails on rooftop. Top right: Mechanical Installers, Jerry Evans and Timm Gould, preparing hardware used for installation. Bottom left: Mechanical Installer, Jerry Evans, connecting AC Cables to Micro-Inverters on rooftop. Bottom right: Electrical Contractor, Linas Revinskas, installing solar panels on rooftop.

Photos by Jocelyn Medeiros, My Generation Energy

years left, what would I be doing?" Hinkle recalls pondering.

The use of solar electricity is growing exponentially in Massachusetts, Hinkle says. "It now makes sense. People are more comfortable with the technology, and net metering (which allows solar producers to sell their excess energy) made it more viable."

Tax incentives and rebates can take thousands of dollars off of the up-front costs, which has also boosted the industry. The initial cost for a residential solar installation, between \$10,000 and \$35,000, remains daunting even though it's typically recouped in four to 10 years. "It's no more than people spend on a car; but you need a car," Hinkle says.

With creative purchasing options that make solar power more accessible, Hinkle is revolutionizing the way residential and commercial property owners think about solar energy. And with subcontractors including McKenzie Engineering Consultants, Bennett Environmental Associates, Coastal Light Electric and Baltic Company refinishing specialists, solar technology is shifting from a niche market to a mainstream tool.

When Andi and Steven Hibbert of Orleans built their house 20 years ago, they wanted solar power but it was too expensive. After building their businesses – Steve has a flooring company and Andi is a personal trainer – and reviewing financial incentives, they decided last year that the time was right. In June, the Hibberts flipped the switch on 24 rooftop solar



Steve and Andi Hibbert showcasing their 5.64 kW system

convert direct current to alternating current independently in each panel, rather than as a single unit. "We can monitor each panel online and find out how much electricity we made for the day," Steve says, "and each panel comes on individually so it can produce a lot more." My Generation Energy also monitors the panels online.

The Hibberts will soon receive another benefit: a roughly \$500 check for each Solar Renewable Energy Credit (SREC) they sell. SRECs, which are managed

installed 13 rooftop panels. "I catch Scott online looking at the panels all the time to see how much they're producing," Kay says.

The Slaters chose solar power not only for environmental reasons and long-term cost savings, but because monitoring the panels was something their children, ages 9 and 7, could connect to. "It's been fun with our kids being able to look up the information," Kay says. "It was so easy – it's been very rewarding."

Barry and Judy Thomas, a retired couple in Chatham, were so pleased with the panels they had installed last July that they had a backyard "solar party" for friends and neighbors. "I consider it kind of a matter of pride. I think they look great," Barry says. His neighbors agree, and some are exploring getting their own solar panels.

For commercial properties, which face larger financial hurdles, Hinkle developed an innovative third-party ownership structure in which My Generation Energy and the business form a company to own the panels and manage the capital resources.

Passers-by might not see them, but 385 panels sit atop the Orleans Marketplace shopping center and

“We can monitor each panel online and find out how much electricity we made for the day...and each panel comes on individually so it can produce a lot more.” – **Steven Hibbert**

panels. By mid-December, the Hibbert household, which includes one son in high school and another in college, had only had one small electric bill.

"I can truly say I have a green studio," Andi says.

The Hibberts selected My Generation Energy because Hinkle was "unbelievably professional" and he offered panels with micro-inverters, which

regionally, are issued for every megawatt of surplus solar electricity purchased by utility companies.

Kay Slater, a clinical social worker and horse farm owner in Harwich, was also keen on installing solar panels, but her husband, Scott, a pulmonologist, had concerns about the cost. Last year, after learning about rebates and incentives from Hinkle, they



Scott & Kay Slater take an interactive approach on solar in educating children, Ben and Hanna, by checking the production of their system through their Enlighten account.

generate power for common meters that run parking lot lights, sign lights and other shared uses. "I was just sick of paying NStar. It really felt like this was the right thing to do, and the cost-effective time to do it," says owner Todd Thayer.

Thayer calls Hinkle a "one-stop shopping guy," and praises his ability to work smoothly through a complicated process. "A lot of people are thinking they'd like to do this, but the bigger picture is how to get the commercial benefit," Thayer says. "Luke's figured this out."

Thayer estimates his costs will be paid back in six or seven years and then, through SRECs, the solar panels will produce cash flow. "That's a pretty good investment," he says. What's more, the panels don't require maintenance or management, and there were no permitting problems.

This year, Hinkle is launching community solar gardens, starting in Brewster and Falmouth, for homeowners whose roofs don't get sufficient sun. "We build a big project that they share," Hinkle says. "The people who make money building it are local, people who run it are local and there's no overhead to NStar or National Grid."

Hinkle still consults to industry about one day a month, but he's found his calling in My Generation Energy. He says, "That was an interesting line of work; this is a mission."

For information about federal and state energy incentives, see www.dsireusa.org. **cha**

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Barry & Judy Thomas getting their monthly meter reading.

