

He's saving money by going solar

BY STEVEN CHURCH
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Bill Jacobson has figured out a way to cut the huge electric bill he has at his Wilmington auto shop.

He is spending \$250,000 to install enough solar panels to supply nearly all of the power he needs to run his small service station and used-Saab dealership. When it is up and running later this month, the system will be the second-biggest solar project in the state, after a system installed several years ago on the former headquarters of defunct solar manufacturer AstroPower.

"I've been wanting to do this for about three years," Jacobson said.

He decided to go ahead now that crushingly high electric bills are on their way for his company, Sports Car Service.

The total price tag is \$500,000, but state grants will cover about half that amount and he also will get a federal tax credit worth another \$78,000. That puts the final cost at about \$172,000, which Jacobson said he will recoup in about five years through lower electric bills.

That was his experience several years ago, when he invested \$27,000 over two years in used-oil burners. Since then, he has burned the motor oil from his repair shop for heat, which reduced his winter heating-oil bills from about \$1,000 a month to about \$300 a month, he said.

"I'm not a Greenpeace person who will spend \$100 to save \$10," Jacobson said. "But I have 13-month-old son at home and my wife is pregnant with No. 2 and I want the world to be around for them."

Sports Car Service employs 14 people and does about \$3.5 million a year in business, Jacobson said. The company was founded in Wilmington in 1956 and was bought five years later by Jacobson's father, who ran the business as a Saab dealership until 1972.

From 1973 to 1984, it was a Saab restoration and repair company until Jacobson took over the business from his dad and added a used-Saab dealership. In 1992, Jacobson moved the company to a former auto dealership on North Market Street with a large flat roof that is ideal for a solar system.

As word spread in the last few months of big rate hikes by Delmarva Power, there has been rising interest in solar electricity in Delaware, said Brian Gallagher, coordinator for Delaware Million Solar Roofs, a government-sponsored initiative that promotes solar power.

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SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL/THOMAS M. NUTTER
Bill Jacobson equipped his business, Sports Car Service, with solar panels to lower his electric bill.

The solar industry has struggled to keep up with demand, with prices of solar panels rising and experienced installers scarce, Gallagher said.

Jacobson is doing much of the installation himself, with advice from the company that sold him much of the equipment, the McConnell Companies, a Wilmington real estate firm. Scott Johnson of McConnell said his company has several similar projects in the works. The company developed a simple mounting system for flat roofs that does not need to be bolted to the building, but is held in place with concrete blocks and the weight of the solar cells.

McConnell got into the solar business as the landlord of the now-defunct solar pioneer AstroPower. When the company built AstroPower's corporate headquarters in 2002 in the Pencader Corporate Center, McConnell helped install thousands of blue solar tiles on the building, enough to generate 333,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity annually, about what 30 average homes would use a year.

Jacobson's system is a 70-kilowatt system that should generate enough electricity to power about 10 homes annually.

And that is just about how much electricity Sports Car Service uses every year, he said.

But Jacobson hopes to make his company completely free from the traditional electric grid. His solution: conservation. If he succeeds, he will not have any electric bill at all.

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