

HERE COMES THE SUN FOR NONPROFIT GROUP

Donation of solar panels helps Habitat for Humanity slash costs

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A new solar-powered energy system at Habitat for Humanity of New Castle County is expected to save the nonprofit housing group \$4,000 on its annual electric costs.

The unit's 80 solar panels were recently installed on the roof of the group's headquarters and warehouse at the corner of Hutton Street and Superfine Lane in Wilmington. Habitat Executive Director Kevin Smith said the savings would be used for construction costs. The group has built or renovated 51 homes for low-income families since 1986 and is scheduled to complete 13 more by the end of the year.

"We'll save enough money on our electric bill to put a roof on one of the houses we build each year," Smith said.

McConnell Energy Solutions, based in Greenville, gave the \$50,000 solar system to Habitat, said Scott D. Johnson, a partner in the energy company. The company is part of The McConnell Companies, which includes real estate and development divisions. The system began operating last week.

McConnell officials decided to get into the energy business about a year ago after finding it difficult to acquire solar-powered energy systems units for its construction projects from other companies, Johnson said. The process was too expensive and took too much time.

"We wanted to make the entire process less painful and the best way we found to simplify everything was to start our own company," he said.

The company created its own energy system, called SolarDock. None have been sold yet. Johnson said the donation to Habitat was part of its effort to market the product.

SolarDock puts the panels on an angle and generates 15 percent more energy than traditional flat solar systems, Johnson said.

The amount of electricity expected to be generated from the system on Habitat's roof each year would eliminate 25,000 pounds of carbon dioxide that would otherwise be emitted from conventional means of generation, McConnell's Aaron Thurlow said. It would take planting 500 trees or taking a car that drives 21,000 miles a year off the road to achieve the same environmental benefit.

Unlike other angled systems, SolarDock does not attach to roofs. The panels and their aluminum supports sit on concrete slabs atop buildings. This makes the product less expensive to install. And it could make it more attractive to customers because many warranties for roofs are canceled if they are penetrated by the installation of solar panels, Johnson said.

Paul McConnell, founder of the energy company, said the gift was a way to help Habitat with its work and improve the environment at the same time.

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Scott Johnson of McConnell Energy Solutions explains how solar panels built by his company will heat Habitat for Humanity of New Castle County.