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Danbury congregation hopes to set solar example

By **Katrina Koerting** Published 12:00 am, Saturday, March 4, 2017



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Solar panels have been installed on the roof of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury's main building on Clapboard Ridge Road. Photo Friday, March 3, 2017.

DANBURY — Ninety-six solar panels cover one side of the roof at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury, making it the city's first religious institution to go solar.

But the congregation hopes other places of worship will follow suit and explore solar, whether as congregations or as individuals.

"We want to be an example of how this can be done and how it can pay for itself," said Gary Mummert, a member of the congregation's Green Team. "We hope to incentivize and encourage other congregations in the Danbury area to join us."

Two years ago, the congregation unanimously voted to move away from fossil fuels over the next 20 years. The rooftop system came online Jan. 8 and generates 32,000 kilowatt hours of electricity, or about four times as much as the congregation needs.

Eversource buys that excess power and pays the congregation \$3,000 annually for being a generator, which helps cover the cost of the \$120,000 system. The \$4,000 or so the church would have put toward annual energy bills are instead put toward the cost of the panels.

"When people look at just the numbers, it's frightening, and when they see the price tag they don't see how it will work," Mummert said. "I want to show them how you can and (that) the state of Connecticut has a lot of incentives to do this."

The congregation saved additional energy by better insulating the two buildings on the property. Members hope to replace the oil boilers with heat pumps, which use electricity to pull heat from the outside air.

Mummert said the congregation decided to make the switch away from fossil fuels for ecological reasons.

"One of our values is to respect the web of all life, which means planet Earth, humans, animals – all life," he said. "The reason I do this is because I have grandchildren and I know one day they'll say, 'Grandpa what did you do when you knew about climate change?' and I want to have a good answer for them."

This belief extends beyond the place of worship. The congregation is one of four religious organizations expected to participate in Solarize With Faith, which launched Sunday.

Solarize With Faith is part of Solarize Connecticut, which started in 2012 and allows residents of participating towns to purchase solar as a group through a vetted contractor for a reduced rate. About 2,400 residents in 73 communities participate in Solarize Connecticut.

The Solarize programs are offered by the Connecticut Green Bank and SmartPower, a nonprofit that promotes solar energy.

"The whole goal of the program is to reduce barriers for people who want to go solar," said Chamae Mejias, a community outreach manager for Solarize with Faith.

Solarize officials, hoping to expand their programs beyond the 73 participating communities, decided to target places of worship, which are already dedicated to stewardship, Mejias said.

Solarize With Faith also helps congregations make informed decisions based on project costs and on how the companies that provide solar panels compare in terms of social responsibility. All Solarize With Faith projects are through Sunlight Solar, which agreed to donate a free kilowatt of solar power to a nonprofit for every 100 kilowatts contracted through the program over 300.

"The motto for our program is, 'Stewardship in our hearts, solar on our roofs,'" Mejias said.

She said she hopes this program helps people realize that going is not expensive once available incentives and future savings are taken into account

Any congregation interested in joining can reach her at 860-331-1041 or cmejias@smartpower.org.

"My biggest hope is to help people understand that they can do something in a very substantial way on the ramifications we're seeing with climate change," she said.

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