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BUSINESS

Sunlight makes right for local company SB-based Open Energy creates solar-celled roofing tiles

PATRICK WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

A Solana Beach company is helping turn energy consumers into energy producers. Open Energy Corp. makes solar energy-producing roofing tiles that allow customers to produce their own electricity and possibly produce it for San Diego County.

David Saltman, Open Energy's president and chief executive officer, said the key to his company's solar energy

system is practicality.

"It's the only system you can walk on," he said. "It really allows photovoltaic (solar energy) systems to be part of the home."

Open Energy seeks to make people more energy-efficient, Saltman said. The company produces solar energy systems with solar-celled, water-resistant roofing tiles, called SolarSave, which withstand 280 pounds of pressure per square foot.

Solar power isn't a short-term investment because prices for such systems start

at around \$26,000 for about 400 square feet of rooftop. But company officials said customers get \$9,800 of that price back in state rebates and federal tax deductions at the end of the year. Then the system cuts electricity needs by 60 percent, the company said, which could pay off the final costs within seven years.

Once the system is paid off, customers could save, or even make, money in two ways, according to Saltman. They could hook up an ener-

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COURTESY PHOTO

A solar energy system was installed on the roof of the Tahoe Center environmental science building at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village, Nev.

► SUNLIGHT

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gy converter, he said, and send solar-produced electricity back into the statewide system. Such a move actually spins a customer's energy meter backward and could result in a check, instead of a bill, from San Diego Gas & Electric Co. if more energy is produced than used.

Second, he said a customer could lower power usage when energy is in most demand and increase it when demand is far less, Saltman said. Customers save money, he said, from SDG&E credits given to reward customers for decreasing power use when demand is high.

Photovoltaic, or solar, energy systems use cells inside the solar tile to capture energy in the sun's rays and convert it to common electricity.

Solar energy use is already electrifying San Diego County. Scott Anders, director of



COURTESY PHOTO

Solar energy-producing tiles are on the roof of the Tahoe Center environmental science building at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village, Nev.

the Energy Policy Initiative Center at the University of San Diego School of Law, studies solar energy and said about 3,500 residential and commercial buildings in the San Diego area have solar systems on their roofs that gener-

ate 21 megawatts.

If the number increased to 35,000, those systems alone could produce 5 percent of the total electricity needs for San Diego County, he said.

Ed Van Herik, spokesman for SDG&E, said the company has contracted to get 300 megawatts of electricity from solar power by 2010.

Open Energy isn't the only California company dealing in solar energy. Power Light Corp. in Berkeley and RWE Schott Solar in Rocklin produce solar energy systems that could be installed on rooftops.

Schott's system even tilts to maximize solar energy production during the day. Locally, General Electric is installing solar energy systems on the roofs of 14 San Diego schools, according to a company news release.

But unlike Open Energy's systems, those solar installations are put on rooftops and don't act as roofs themselves, according to the companies' Web sites. It makes Open En-

ergy's solar tiles more attractive to buildings in northern or mountainous locations because they can handle snow, according to the news release.

Durability was one key factor why Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village, Nev., chose the company to put a \$250,000 solar energy system on the roof of the new Tahoe Center environmental science building, according to a company public-relations handout.

When it wasn't protecting the building from snow, the solar energy system would generate around 4.5 megawatts per hour monthly, enough electricity to power at least 2,900 homes, the release said.

Anders said he was impressed with Open Energy's attempts to make the tiles look appealing in colors meant to blend in with different types of housing styles. Because solar panels are usually installed on a roof section, and rarely cover the whole roof, they tend to be easy to see and can detract

from a building's appearance.

Anders said many people want to install solar energy systems, but think they look ugly.

"I think there is some logic to trying to develop projects that are more aesthetically pleasing," Anders said.

Saltman said there is no time like the present for the country to get serious about alternative energy sources. He said the company has \$4 million in orders from customers in and out of the state such as the California Academy of Science in San Francisco and a medical building in New Jersey. Also, he would like to expand his company in to products that use solar power to turn saltwater into drinking water.

"We are in a hurry," he said. "When you think about global warming, we should all be in a hurry."

Contact staff writer Patrick Wright at (760) 739-6675 or pwright@nctimes.com. To comment, go to nctimes.com.