

Milford company goes completely solar with rooftop arrays

MILFORD — Executives at Clarke, a distributor of high-end kitchen appliances, can't wait to see the electric bill for their Milford headquarters.

Despite running 75 refrigerators, electric forklifts, a television studio and many computers, company's bill should read "zero - or hopefully show a credit," General Manager Sean Clarke said.

That's because its 106,500-square-foot building is now powered by more than 2,300 solar panels on its roof.

When it's sunny, the panels produce excess electricity, sending power to the grid. When it's cloudy, the company pulls power from the grid. Ultimately, with some energy-efficiency upgrades, it should work out to net zero electrical energy consumption, company executives said.

"It was the right thing to do financially and environmentally," Clarke said.

The company spent \$2 million on the project and hopes to recoup its investment in four years through tax incentives, renewable energy credits and by eliminating its electric bill, said Chris Parker, finance director for the business.

The panels produce about 1,800 kilowatts a day and are among the top five rooftop solar installations in Massachusetts in terms of kilowatts produced.

Executives first talked about the concept in 2006 and began making definitive plans two years ago, Parker said.

"The economy got in the way in 2007, and we had to focus on our business itself," he said.

The company was already planning to replace its roof and installed a white, reflective material that redirects sunlight onto the solar panels. The installation was finished a couple of weeks before Tropical Storm Irene, and the panels survived the strong winds and rain without incident, Parker said.

The company had planned a ribbon-cutting ceremony with several state and federal politicians, but that was canceled after some politicians pulled out - likely because of controversy surrounding the California company from which Clarke bought the panels, Clarke said.

Solyndra, once cited by the Obama administration as an example of how the economic stimulus bill would create jobs, received a \$500 million loan from the Energy Department in 2009. But the company filed for bankruptcy last month and has laid off 1,100 workers. Executives have said Solyndra could not compete with foreign solar-panel manufacturers.

Clarke said his company picked Solyndra because it's an American manufacturer. Company leaders aren't worried about the effect the bankruptcy will have on the project here because they have 40 to 50 spare panels and used a New Bedford installer that is still in business.

"We're much more concerned as U.S. citizens that the technology we developed is going overseas," Clarke said.

Selectman Brian Murray praised the company for doing its part to switch to renewable energy and reduce the country's dependence on foreign fuels.

"It's always nice to see local businesses grow and adapt to the times," Murray said, adding he's hopeful it will spur other companies to pursue renewable energy. "Clarke has been a great corporate citizen. We're lucky to have them in the town."

Clarke said the company plans to install a kiosk in its lobby so customers can learn about the panels.

"We're really, really proud of what we've been able to accomplish and want to inspire others," he said.

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