

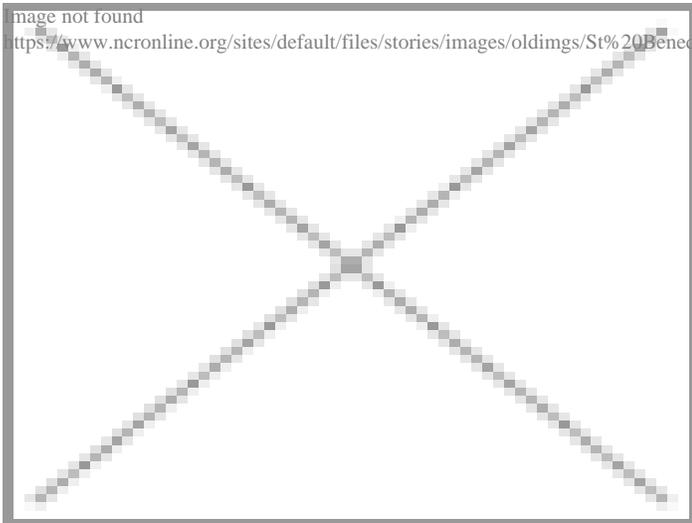
Parish's solar panels renew energy, commitment to creation

Brian Roewe | May. 16, 2012 Eco Catholic

As spring gave way to winter, more than flowers were found sprouting up on the grounds at a Catholic parish and school in Holmdel, N.J.

For St. Benedict Parish and School, the sun's rays not only give life to their plants and shrubbery, but they now bring power to its buildings.

On April 22, Earth Day, the parish community gathered, amid heavy rain showers, to bless the nearly 1,000 solar panels installed on their property. The panels — set up in two arrangements, one behind the school and one on top of a school building's roof — will generate enough electricity to power the entire parish campus, as well as symbolize their stewardship to the earth.



"It's a tenant of Catholic social justice teaching, that we're supposed to take care of our earth," said Catherine Warshaw, a parish administrator who worked closely on the project.

With the panels, St. Benedict now purchases their energy at a reduced, locked-in rate from 1st Light Energy, the company who installed and paid for the panels, at nine cents per kilowatt hour, rather than 15 cents/kWh from New Jersey's Board of Public Utilities.

More than that, through a Board of Utilities program, the parish receives credits toward their bill for the energy generated by their panels, through a process known as net metering.

"We're generating either an equal amount to what we're using, or almost an equal amount, which is really responsible to do it that way," Warshaw said.

Warshaw had experience with solar before coming to St. Benedict four years ago. An associate member of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell, she worked on a solar project while at Caldwell College, in Caldwell, N.J.

She even lived in a primitive solar house in the late 1970s.

In following one of the pillars of her order ? care for creation ? she sees the installation of the solar panels at St. Benedict as a teachable moment for the nearly 3,500 family parish community.

The first moment to teach came the day after the dedication, at a Science Day for the elementary school.

The next day, Warsaw and a 1st Light Energy representative spoke with the children about the new addition to the grounds, explaining the process of turning the sun's solar rays into electricity, as well as answering questions about power on cloudy days and what happens should an errant foul ball strike a panel.

?I was really impressed with how sophisticated they were with their questions,? Warshaw said.

In explaining the rationale for the panels, Warshaw used the story of the Lorax ? still fresh in the minds of the children, given the recent film ? to illustrate the need to care for the earth, saying that ?each of them could act as a Lorax, in doing what they could to save the earth.?

That included speaking to their parents, who Warshaw said are often as unaware of the benefits and affordability of renewable energy from solar panels as their children are.

Weeks after the dedication, the St. Benedict parish sought to eliminate any ambiguity about solar energy, as they invited the Holmdel community to a solar seminar May 9.

Aside from explaining the process of installing panels at their own homes, Warsaw and 1st Light representatives explained their Benevolent Solar Fund.

A 1st Light Energy program, the fund provides a \$500-\$1000 donation for each homeowner or business choosing to begin a solar project with them as a result of the St. Benedict project. The program is open to non-profit organizations and municipalities.

For St. Benedict, the first participant in the program, they intend to use any donations toward reducing school tuition or funding various parish outreach programs.

Warsaw has done solar consulting for other parishes within the Trenton, N.J. diocese, and she hopes to see others take advantage of the benefits of the fixed and reduced energy costs provided by the panels.

But more than the financial gains, the array of solar panels at St. Benedict stand as a reminder of the call of every Catholic to care for the earth, said Warsaw, a message that speaks volumes on its own.

?It preaches the Gospel without using words,? she said.

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