

# Green Living

## Capturing Sunlight

By Rachel Pastiva



**One Person Can Make a Difference - Dave Strenski** has been busy bringing solar power to Ypsilanti.

Most people don't know that a movement is being constructed in Ypsilanti. A movement that not only promises a brighter future, but also relies on "brightness" for its success. In Ypsilanti, solar power is generating a lot of interest as a viable renewable energy source, and a man by the name of Dave Strenski is the one sparking the city's interest.

"I consider myself more a geek than an environmentalist," says Dave, an Application Analyst for Cray Inc. "I like this stuff because it's really interesting from a technical point of view." With a Bachelor of Science in Land Surveying and Civil Engineering and a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering, Dave's point of view isn't surprising. What his interest in solar power has created is.

Dave's curiosity in solar power began in 2004 when Ypsilanti Food Cooperative Manager Corinne Sikorski approached him about installing solar panels on the Cooperative's roof. Through research, he discovered a Community Energy Projects Grant through the State of Michigan. The grant, designed to promote green building technologies, awards up to \$6,000 towards renewable energy technology for non-profit organizations, schools and government agencies. Although neither Dave nor Corinne had ever written a grant before, they compiled and submitted what turned out to be a winning proposal. This would fund the building materials to place four solar panels on the roof.

While working strictly as a volunteer, Dave be-

came increasingly inspired as he acquainted himself with the process of installing solar panels. With the help of a solar contractor in Ann Arbor, he learned about the cost and efficiency of varying forms of solar power. He also researched the availability of supplies in the state of Michigan and was surprised and excited to discover thirty renewable energy contractors throughout the state, and a major solar panel manufacturer in Auburn Hills, Uni-Solar. With over \$18 billion leaving Michigan each year to import coal, oil and natural gas, it is easy to understand how solar power is an investment in our state economy as well as the environment. "If we could make our own power within the state, it would be like injecting \$18 billion into the economy every year. Forget about everything else! That's a good enough reason to do it for me."

Solar panels are not only great for the environment, they're also easy to install. Even though an electrician was hired to oversee the project, Dave was able to do most of the wiring himself. With the help of Blue Way, from Blue Sky Carpentry, and another volunteer, he installed the panels in under three hours. "That's what has surprised me more than anything else—it was fairly simple to do."

One of the requirements of the grant was to educate people about renewable energies, so Dave created an informative hour-long solar power presentation about photovoltaic energy. In it, he included his experience installing solar panels, as well as their cost, pros and cons. Soon after he began giving the presentation, he was approached by Jason Bing of

Recycle Ann Arbor's Environmental House. Through Jason's work, grant monies are available to organizations who promote green building technologies. For every person Dave gives his solar panel presentation to, Jason is able to give the Cooperative ten dollars towards more solar power technology. Currently, Dave Strenski and Cooperative volunteer Adam Chase have given the presentation over forty times to more than a thousand people, traveling to schools, universities, organizations, and any other interested groups.

Through Dave and Adam's volunteer work, the Cooperative has earned enough money to install a fifth panel as well as net-metering. Net-metering is a billing process with DTE Energy that allows the Cooperative to sell or "bank" excess power during the day and buy it back at a later time. Dave worked with DTE to install digital utility meters that have a customer interface so the Cooperative can read the meters directly with a computer and post the information on a website. The website, [www.solar.ypsi.com](http://www.solar.ypsi.com), is still under construction.

The presentations also inspired a new idea. Often returning to Ypsilanti after a presentation, Dave stops at the intersection of Huron and Michigan Avenue, right next to City Hall. Now versed in solar panel technology, he recognized its south-facing wall as a perfect place to capture sunlight with solar panels. Dave immediately made an appointment with the mayor to discuss the possibility of turning the idea into reality.

Due to City Hall's designation as a historic building, the mayor required Dave to get approval from the Historic District Commission (HDC). This became a yearlong project of planning, permits, and formal meetings. Meanwhile, interested citizens wrote letters to the HDC and appeared at meetings to show their support of the project. When the HDC required a structural engineer to draft an installation plan that would cost up to \$3,800, a friend of the project, Richard Murphy, built a website for donations. Interested individuals raised \$1,000 towards the City Hall solar panel project.

It was during this time that Jason Bing again approached Dave to suggest another grant through the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth. Dave and Corinne compiled and submitted a new proposal for over \$35,000 to add seven more panels to the

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Cooperative and fund twelve for City Hall. Within weeks of sending the proposal, Jason suggested yet another grant. Without knowing the outcome of their first proposal, they wrote a second one for installing panels on the Cooperative's bakery. They were astonished to be awarded both. "I think we're winning these grants because we have zero labor costs, so basically all we're asking for is money for the materials."

With a portion of the \$80,000 of grant monies awarded to the Ypsilanti Food Cooperative, and with the money raised by the public, Dave was able to hire a structural engineer for the City Hall project, and the Historic District Commission approved the project. By the summer of 2009, twelve panels will be placed on the back of City Hall. Seven additional panels will be added to the Cooperative's roof.

The remaining grant will go towards the installation of thirty panels on River Street Bakery, owned and operated by the Ypsilanti Food Cooperative. Combined with the wood burning oven used to bake its bread, the thirty panels will complete the bakery's goal to operate on 100% renewable energy.

"Solar power is the way of the future," Dave says confidently. Through the Ypsilanti Food Cooperative demonstration and the forthcoming solar panels on City Hall, Dave hopes to illustrate the accessibility of solar power and generate greater demand for the technology. Because more demand leads to better technology at lower prices, solar panels might be capturing sunlight on rooftops around Ypsilanti sooner than we might think. "That's why I'm doing this; I want everybody to do it. I want everybody to put up systems... I'm just a handyman and I did it. So I think people can do it."

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