

# Solar panels on Mill Hill's roof? Sponsors needed

By Tim Loh  
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Chris Thomas graduated from Mill Hill Elementary School in the 1970s. His 9-year-old daughter is a student there now.

He has a vision, "Perhaps one day when my children's children go to school there, we'll have solar panels on every school and municipal building in Fairfield."

Thomas is hoping to kick-start things at Mill Hill. He's spearheading a Fairfield Board of Education initiative that would install solar panels on the school's rooftop and turn it into a small energy farm. If he succeeds in securing \$150,000 in pledged donations from corporate sponsors by Oct. 1, the town could be one 20-kilowatt photovoltaic array of solar panels closer to his dream.

Here's the upside for businesses considering sponsoring: The donations are part of a state-sponsored "tax swap" established by the Connecticut Neighborhood Assistance Act (NAA). Every dollar contributed reduces the firm's income tax liability for that year by an equal amount.

The state legislature established a 1-to-1 credit ratio in 2007 for energy conservation projects. Donations to other NAA projects bring tax credits of 60 percent. But businesses that wish to donate must inform the State Department of Revenue Services by Oct. 1. For more information, contact the town's Department of Community & Economic Development at 256-3120.

Four other programs in Fairfield are seeking to raise funds through the NAA this year: Fairfield Arts Council Inc. — Arts in the Community Program (\$1,500); Fairfield Police Department — DUI Enforcement (\$2,000); Operation Hope of Fairfield, Inc. — Food & Shelter Services (\$100,000); and Jewish Home for the Elderly — Center for Elder Abuse Prevention (\$50,000).

Thomas's project would place 105 solar panels in a 50-foot by 50-foot array on the school's roof. He estimates that the annual energy savings for the school would be about 10 percent and that the panels would be in operation for more than 25 years.

"The beauty of these solar panels is that there are no moving parts and they require very little maintenance," he said. "They might require periodic wiping down of the surface, of course."

Another advantage, he explained, is that they're easy to install. They would come off a truck, be placed in a rack system, and angled at 10 degrees toward the south, so that they receive light as the sun arcs across the sky.

It would also serve as a unique education tool, he adds. In a release to the *Fairfield Citizen*, he wrote, "An added benefit will be that the 475 students at Mill Hill can view a small screen in the lobby, which would display the amount of electricity currently being generated, the total amount generated and the amount of carbon dioxide, a 'so-called green house gas,' that is being avoided by using the rooftop array."

Fairfield already has a 2-kilowatt array of solar panels at Fairfield Woods Middle School. In the next few months, similar arrays should be installed at Roger Ludlowe and Tomlinson Middle Schools as well. The goal, according to Larry Kaley, chairman of Fairfield's Clean Energy Task Force, is to outfit all middle schools so that every child in the public school system will have an opportunity to see how it works. Grants from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund have financed these solar panels. But Thomas's plan is unique in that local companies provide the bulk of the funding.

Another source of funding could come from the Mill Hill students themselves. According to Dan Smith, the student



Chris Thomas — with his two daughters, Skylar and Hailey, at Mill Hill Elementary School — hopes corporate sponsors will sign up by the Oct. 1 deadline to help fund solar panels for the school, which would be installed on the roof.

council coordinator at the school, students became increasingly interested in solar power in 2007 when *Time Magazine* ran an issue about things kids can do to save the earth. One option: installing solar panels.

Through various fundraisers since then, the council has amassed a pot of roughly \$10,000, which last year's council wanted to spend solely on helping purchase panels for the school. This year's council won't start meeting until the end of September.

"All our energy is really derived from the sun anyways," Thomas said,

citing a study that one hour's worth of sunshine that reaches earth rough-

ly equates to the total annual energy consumption by all of humankind. "So

it's all here for free. We just have to figure out how to utilize it better."

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