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Off the grid: Wilson taps into the power of the sun

By Ellie Oleson CORRESPONDENT

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OXFORD — Edward J. Wilson smiled as the sun shone down on his \$1.2 million, 714-solar-panel array at Wilson Language Training Corp.'s headquarters at 47 Old Webster Road May 15.

On that day, the company officially launched its solar power system, which has been online since December, and is the largest active system in Worcester County and the seventh-largest system in Massachusetts, said Mr. Wilson, company co-owner and chief financial officer.

"This is great. As the spring comes and the sun rises, we're nearing maximum generation of 139 kilowatts."

Wilson Language, which employs 87, is nationally known as a provider of literacy curricula for general education and special needs children and adults, and of professional development for educators.

The company came to Oxford in 2004. Town Manager Joseph M. Zeneski said, "The town is pleased to have an innovative company with an innovative lifestyle that is sustainable. We in town also have to find better ways of doing things that can be sustained."

The Wilson array of solar panels covers 9,000 square feet of the 11,000-square-foot roof of the company's on-site warehouse.

The system provides 22 percent of the company's electricity, saving an estimated \$19,000 per year, according to Bert M. Baldarelli, director of financial services for the company.

He said the cost of the \$1.2 million system was reduced by a \$420,000 rebate from Commonwealth Solar, an initiative sponsored by the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Trust. The remaining cost will be further offset by federal tax credits, a 50 percent bonus depreciation and other elements.

"Basically, it will cost us a little over \$300,000, to be paid over six years. Then we will have at least 14 years of free electricity," Mr. Baldarelli said.

Kenneth S. Brown, a spokesman for Commonwealth Solar, said that funding for solar projects comes from a charge on the electric bills of Massachusetts residents.

"Commonwealth Solar is offering rebates of \$17 million per year for four years to those who install solar. A one-time rebate is issued once panels are installed," Mr. Brown said.

He said the rebate is 20 percent to 40 percent of the cost of installation and the

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cost of the solar panels. Certain restrictions apply.

"It can't be issued for a solar farm. At least 50 percent of the total (electricity) generated must be used on-site," he said. The rebate application must be submitted and approved before the installation.

Mr. Wilson said his solar panels went online Christmas Eve 2008. "Whatever we generate is sold directly to National Grid."

The rows of panels turn solar energy into direct current. This is inverted to alternating current and fed into the National Grid lines, according to Jared N. Connell of system installer Borrego Solar Systems Inc. of Lowell.

He said the solar panels have 65 percent to 70 percent efficiency from April to October, with less production in winter. "Snow is semi-translucent up to 6 inches deep, so you get some power."

Mr. Baldarelli said that as the sun shines, even on weekends when the offices are closed, the company will be saving money on its electric bill.

The company's electric meter "spins backward when electricity is being generated by the panels and forward when the company uses more than it is producing, and the company pays the difference," Mr. Connell said.

Mr. Baldarelli said he received a \$700 check from National Grid this month.

Scott E. Marcoux, facilities manager for the company, said the panels are basically maintenance-free, requiring only minor cleaning.

Sam Nutter, senior project manager for the Renewable Energy Trust, said Gov. Deval L. Patrick set a goal in 2008 to have 250 megawatts of solar power generated in Massachusetts by 2018. So far, just 10 megawatts are generated, which is double what was generated before the trust funding, which has given rebates for 1,300 installations. Most of these are on homes and are far smaller than Wilson's 139-kilowatt array.

Mr. Nutter said these solar projects have resulted in 125 new solar installation companies in the state and \$25 million in rebates to homeowners and companies so far.

Andrew Reed, director of sales for Borrego Solar Systems, said, "Wilson is one of the most forward-thinking energy leaders in the state. In the life of their system, it will offset 8 million pounds of carbon, 16,000 trees or 10,000 barrels of oil."



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