

# Solar Sebastopol

## Community Energy Project

Michael Welch

©2003 Michael Welch

I have become an energy fair groupie. If one is within range, you can count on me showing up. Last August when I was visiting a friend in Santa Rosa, California, there was an energy fair in nearby Sebastopol. I was prepared for the normal hobnobbing with the public and the usual RE suspects. What I didn't expect to see was the incredible relationship that the city of Sebastopol is building with renewable energy.

The fair itself was excellent. RE product sales were not high, but the exposure was also mostly to folks new to RE, rather than the folks already into it and living with it. There were lots of booths, as many RE dealers as I have seen at any fair, and the usual food, music, and workshops, too. About 1,500 people attended the fair. That is not a big fair, but the people were more interested than usual in becoming new RE system owners.

The uniqueness was that with a few exceptions, the fair was aimed at the urban grid-intertie market. It was also different that a government agency was primarily responsible for the event's ultimate goal of one megawatt of PV to be installed on the rooftops of this small town by 2005.

### Inspiration

The project got started when a class at nearby Sonoma State University (SSU) researched and published a study showing that 1,000 to 1,500 KW of PV could be installed on Sebastopol rooftops, financed by issuing municipal bonds. The May 2002 study concluded that the city could significantly reduce the costs of these installations and make them more attractive to homeowners by becoming a "facilitator," taking care of financing and transaction costs, and getting the public and businesses interested.

Sebastopol's city council was ready to find ways to provide RE for the community. They had grand visions of creating financial incentives for solar and wind, but did not have the resources to hire the consultants needed to get those kinds of programs going. So without permanently abandoning their old idea, the SSU report gave them a focus, and the council endorsed the study's conclusions.

Sebastopol is proud of its progressive politics, and Mayor Craig Litwin clearly relishes the fact that Sebastopol

is the first city to enact this type of program. "I am thrilled with this. I want to see as many solar roofs as possible and... we can make it happen. This will help Sebastopol become a more sustainable place."

### Enter CCenergy

The city then put out an RFP (request for proposals) for bids on the project. Many companies, large and small, were interested in getting this contract. But the successful bid was by Cooperative Community Energy (CCenergy), a northern California, member-owned co-op, with a very interesting mission statement:

*Cooperative Community Energy provides access to reasonably priced renewable energy solutions for homes and businesses. It will work with its members to provide and use energy solutions that are environmentally and economically sensible. The fees earned from the primary business of reselling renewable energy equipment will be used to engage the public, the energy markets, and the political leaders in the building of safe and lasting renewable energy solutions.*

Sebastopol's leaders loved the fact that they had a bid from a company that was as much into education and advocacy as it was sales and profits—it was a perfect fit.

As with most co-ops, CCenergy is a business, but they are not in business to make a net profit. Instead of making a profit, their goal is to get as much RE into use as possible. Yes, they have to meet expenses and make payroll just like any other business. But with co-ops, the theory is that all net profits are given back to the members, usually in the form of dividends. In practice, CCenergy's profits go into education and advocacy for more RE. Of course, member-owned co-ops are steered by the member/owners. In this case, the members agree that they want to see the funds go into furthering RE.

Die-hard capitalists may cry, "No fair! We have to compete directly with a company that does not need to make a profit." But really, most small businesses operate this way, too. The owner is a worker, and needs to get paid for the work done, but any extra money is usually plowed back into the business to keep it viable. CCenergy's viability is





The thickening crowd, early on fair day.



CCenergy's booth at the fair.

Photos by Sonoma West Publishers

directly connected to getting more RE. What CCenergy is doing to fulfill their mission is providing services to communities that might not otherwise have access to those services, and providing services to individuals who might not otherwise be able to find or afford those services.

According to Dan Pellegrini, co-founder and president of CCenergy, municipalities are good at setting public policy and accessing capital. Private organizations are more efficient at coordinating relationships between individual citizens and businesses, like manufacturers and local contractors. "That's where we come in.... It's a great public sector/private sector partnership."

In working with the city to implement the Solar Sebastopol initiative, CCenergy is taking care of everything necessary to make solar energy easy, affordable, and accessible to the citizens and businesses of Sebastopol by:

- Raising awareness and interest
- Educating people about solar technology and rebate incentives
- Visiting homes, businesses, and municipal sites to assess energy needs and solar feasibility
- Helping clients conserve energy and increase energy efficiency in their homes
- Providing design services and solar installer referrals
- Arranging low-interest financing
- Ordering equipment (at up to 35% below retail cost)
- Handling all building permits, California Energy Commission rebates, and utility paperwork

Part of the project's goal is to demonstrate this model to other communities. Several cities and counties, including San Francisco, have expressed interest in the Solar Sebastopol model. If you would like to see something like this happen in your own area, get in touch with your like-minded community leaders, and then give the folks at CCenergy a call. CCenergy is working the bugs out of their program in Sebastopol, and once they have done so, they will be ready to go to work in your community.

### Access

Michael Welch, c/o Redwood Alliance, PO Box 293, Arcata, CA 95518 • 707-822-7884 • michael.welch@homepower.com • www.redwoodalliance.org

City of Sebastopol, PO Box 1776, Sebastopol, CA 95473 • 707-823-1153 • www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us

Cooperative Community Energy (CCenergy), 534 Fourth St. Suite C, San Rafael, CA 94901 • 877-228-8700 or 415-457-0215 • Fax: 415-457-0216 • info@ccenergy.com • www.ccenergy.com

