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Revolution Energy installs 572-panel solar PV system on Favorite Foods distribution facility

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Imagine being able to power your most oft-running appliance - the refrigerator, in the case of many a household - on nothing but energy from the sun, harvested with a panel or two.

Not too shabby, right?

Now imagine using solar energy to run an industrial cooler and freezer which combined take up nearly seven Olympic sized swimming pools of space.

That's precisely what Favorite Foods intends to do when the Somersworth commercial food distributor puts online a 140-kilowatt, 572-panel roof-mounted solar PV system next month.

Good luck fitting that in your kitchen.

The system is poised to be the largest of its kind in New Hampshire and, once the switch is flipped a few weeks from now, one of the most productive as well. Consisting of 572 American-made panels, the array is expected to generate 17% of Favorite Foods' energy load, in the process helping power a business with annual sales in the eight figures.

At nearly 170,000 kilowatt-hours per year, the system's expected payload will be enough to power 23 modestly sized homes. That's like waking up one morning to find your roof - along with the roofs of everyone on your street - outfitted with a full-fledged solar array.

"We're very excited to have the system online," said company president Chris Barstow, who co-founded the company in 1978. "We're always looking for ways to be more green, and this is a huge step forward in that direction."

But while comprehensive lighting overhauls, voluntary PSNH power shutdowns - both of which have been undertaken by the company in recent months - are nothing to scoff at, there's little that can match the sheer visual and financial appeal of a comprehensive solar system.

Spearheading the installation is Revolution Energy, a Portsmouth-based company specializing in unique financing mechanisms that allow clients to pay for the system over time. Think of it as a "green mortgage," with Revolution leveraging local financial institutions for the initial loan, and Favorite Foods "renting to buy."

Both Revolution and Favorite Foods are members of Green Alliance, the Portsmouth-based "green business union" which brings sustainability-minded businesses and consumers together in an effort to support the local economy.

Andrew Kellar, project coordinator for Revolution, said the Favorite Foods system is proof positive that the solar industry is alive, well, and only growing in the Granite State.

"Probably what we're most excited about is who we're working with," said Kellar. "Favorite Foods has been a leader in renewable energy and efficiency upgrades to their building and fleet, and we think they'll serve as an incredible example of what's possible."

According to Kellar, Favorite Foods will be able to constantly monitor the system's real-time

production - from a computer, no less - thanks to a special inverter installed on site.

"That's a big part of the excitement - being able to see in real time the savings and the reduced carbon footprint," said Barstow. "This way we won't be guessing about how it's performing, because we'll know almost exactly."

The system was funded in part by the State's Renewable Energy Fund, which has come under political fire in recent years. Still, Kellar says that the Favorite Foods is just the kind of high-profile project that could go a long way in proving the efficacy of alternative energy in the Granite State.

"The challenge always lies in what other states are doing to support renewable energy - do you stay, or do you go where the incentives are more beneficial?" he said. "The Renewable Energy Fund is a step in the right direction for New Hampshire, and we hope the Favorite Foods project is just the beginning of a growing trend."

Revolution released a video on YouTube that shows the entirety of the system's construction condensed into 36, time-lapsing seconds. The intent is clear: to show how alternative technology - while no doubt complicated and doubtless above the heads of many - is, at its core, a pretty simple idea.

Perhaps no one has seen the green light more than Barstow himself. While his firm has long been committed to fostering a business ethic centered around the idea of local commerce - he even went so far as to write a public letter to Applebee's turning down the national chain's offer for a distribution partnership - the company's drive towards sustainability has proven an educational experience for all involved.

But that won't stop Favorite Foods from celebrating what hopes to be a crucial graduation.

"This is a huge step for us, but working with Revolution has made a very complicated and difficult process very manageable," said Barstow. "It's going to have a positive effect on our energy consumption, and we're looking forward to that being something we can really hang our hat on."

Jim Cavan is the director of media and PR at The Green Alliance, Portsmouth, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540