

Grey skies don't stop solar celebration

By Christian Schiavone

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Acton, Mass. - It was exactly 34 degrees with winds of between 10 and 12 miles per hour, but about 40 local residents turned out last weekend to see the unveiling of the town's new solar panel array and meteorological equipment.

Perched atop the concession stand next to Leary Field, the 10 solar panels reflecting the dull gray clouds above were the culmination of nine months of work by local volunteers and environmental advocates.

"It feels like I've just had a baby," said Kate Crosby, a member of the Acton Climate Action Team, which helped secure the donated solar panel array, as onlookers warmed their hands on cocoa in environmentally friendly cups. "I've been really struck by the level of community excitement and good will."

Acton was one of six communities in the state to win a free solar panel for a school or municipal building by raising donations from at least 150 households for the New England Wind Fund between Jan. 1 and April 30. More than 175 Acton households made monthly or one-time donations. The two-kilowatt solar panel array was donated by the Renewable Energy Trust of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. It will power the concession stand and feed into the school's power supply to provide electricity for other areas and the field's scoreboard.

Crosby's group and the Acton Parent Involvement Project spearheaded the project.

State Rep. Jamie Eldridge, D-Acton, said the new solar panels symbolize the growing push for renewable energy across the county.

"This is part of a nationwide really grassroots movement where the public is really telling their leaders, especially on the federal level, that we need to take greater action to stop global warming and to embrace things like solar and wind [power]," he said.

Eldridge made investment in solar and wind power part of his platform during his run for the 5th Congressional District race against Rep. Niki Tsongas, D-Mass. Eldridge also said he hoped the House's passage of a new energy reform bill with a heavy emphasis on renewable energy would lead to additional green projects around the state in the future.

In addition to cutting the schools' energy costs, the solar panels and weather center will offer new educational opportunities for students, who will eventually be able to monitor data such as the panels' output, wind speed and temperature from their classrooms. Students will be able to see the effect of a cloud passing over the array in real time.

"A lot of times there's a big ribbon cutting and that's the extent of the educational value, but with the data display, this is just the beginning," said Clayton Handleman, president of Heliotronics, a Hingham-based firm that provided the software for the project.

Inside the junior high school, attendees of the event watched a computer display, updated every second, of what students will eventually have access to in every classroom.

The weather station also has a Web site for public use — ab.mec.edu/solarpanel — which updates every 15 minutes.

Christian Schiavone can be reached at 978-371-5743 or at cschiavo@cnc.com.