

## Whatcom County businesses seeing economic benefits of solar



Vicki and Sandy Savage, owners of the North Fork Brewery, recently had 40 solar panels installed at her business. Vicki estimates that she will earn back her investment in the project in seven years by selling her solar-generated power back to Puget Sound Energy. And the North Fork isn't the only Whatcom County business undertaking a large solar installation. Josh Durias | [www.joshdurias.com](http://www.joshdurias.com)

by [Ryan Wynne](#)

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If there's such a thing as woodsy ambiance, the North Fork Brewery has it. Inside the business's 106-year-old building, worn black leather logging boots hang from a support beam. Wood paneling, soft lighting and the brewery's beer shrine give the dining area a comfy, old lodge feel.

The building's exterior suits the interior. Slatted wood siding helps it melt into the verdant woods that surround it, but a new addition starkly contrasts the building's — and the historic logging area's — old-time feel.

What looks like a giant, six-legged table stands high above the North Fork's gravel parking lot, and 40 glossy, black solar panels sit at the top, reflecting the sky above.

The panels were installed in early January. Since then, Vicki Savage, who owns the North Fork with her husband Sandy, has monitored the panels' effectiveness almost compulsively. At least once a day, she checks the system's inverter to see just how much power it is generating.

"It could get obsessive," Savage said.

### **County businesses get on board**

Alex Ramel, policy and energy manager for Sustainable Connections, said nearly every week he hears from business owners who are interested in solar panels.

"They are hearing that other businesses are doing it and wanting to find out if it's right for their businesses too," Ramel said.

Certainly some are finding that it doesn't make good business sense, he said.

"But in many cases, we are finding that it does make [good economic sense](#)," Ramel said. "They are looking at the numbers and saying, 'Yes. This is a good business decision.'"

The North Fork was one such business. It is also one of the first, if not the first, business in Whatcom County to install enough solar panels to offset its annual electricity consumption, Ramel said.

But the North Fork isn't alone; at least two more county businesses are attempting similar feats. The Woods Coffee [building in Boulevard Park](#) may be outfitted with 24 panels, if financing and city approval are obtained, and Mountain Veterinary Hospital on Mount Baker Highway will cover its entire south-facing roof with 45 panels by the end of March.

These projects aren't cheap — The Woods will spend \$45,000 on its project and Mountain Veterinary Hospital will spend \$53,000 — but representatives from each said it's worth it.

Those generating electricity can sell it back to Puget Sound Energy. The utility then credits the businesses for power they produced. If the businesses produce as much electricity as they consume, they end up paying nothing for electricity for the year. If the businesses produce more electricity than they use, they get paid for it.

“This was first and foremost, a business decision,” Savage said. “The feel-good factors are sort of the fringes.”



Vicki and Sandy Savage recently installed 40 solar panels at the North Fork Brewery — possibly enough to offset their annual electricity consumption. Josh Durias | [www.joshdurias.com](http://www.joshdurias.com)

### **Solar in NW Washington?**

At first glance, solar may not seem like a good idea for the area, said Collin Morrow, a certified public accountant for The Woods Coffee, but judging from what he has learned, it is.

This area gets 25 percent more sun than Germany, which is home to half of the world’s installed solar panels, said Dana Brandt, owner of Ecotech Energy Systems.

“We really do get enough sun here,” he said.

Solar’s functionality can be seen first hand at the North Fork. On Feb. 11, the sky was thick with cloud cover and rain drops fell. Still, the panels were generating 123 watts of electricity, while the business was using 105 — of course, they hadn’t opened yet for the day.

Savage thinks her panels will produce enough electricity to eventually generate revenue for her business, but she can’t measure how well the panels will work on a year-round basis at this point.

“But I’m so sold on this,” she said. “It’s like my midlife crisis is a solar panel, not a red Corvette.”

Savage didn’t want to say how much she and her husband invested in the panels, but did say the power generated by the panels should produce enough electricity to offset a \$450 per month electricity bill and that the panels should pay for themselves in seven years.

40: the percent of total U.S. energy consumed by buildings in 2008, U.S. Energy Information Administration

The Mountain Veterinary Hospital panels are also expected to generate enough electricity to make the business money, clinic co-owner Ed Stone said. His system should pay for itself in five years.

If The Woods' estimates are correct, the business will make back its \$45,000 investment in five to eight years, Morrow said.

Morrow doesn't expect The Woods' panels to generate more electricity than the company uses at its Boulevard Park location. The Woods was limited in how many panels it could install at that location by the size and shape of its roof. But, he said, the panels will offset The Woods' electric bill by enough to make their installation worthwhile.

"We are a growing company and we are not going to go invest a bunch of money in something that's not proven or that's unknown," Morrow said. "We're not in a position where we are going to spend tens of thousands of dollars just to do it."

### **The time is nigh**

The Savages had always entertained the idea of solar, and when electricity rates started increasing about five years ago, their interest took on a bit of urgency, Savage said.

"That was sort of the turning point for us," she said.

Still, solar seemed too expensive until recently. Now, she said, borrowing money for energy projects will never be cheaper.

There are currently four financial incentives to install solar panels.

- 1) The federal government is offering a 30 percent tax credit for solar systems placed in service before Dec. 31, 2016.
- 2) Until 2020, the Washington State government will pay businesses generating solar power between 15 cents and \$1.08 per kilowatt hour produced.
- 3) All solar equipment and installation is sales tax free.
- 4) There are [low interest loans](#) available specifically for energy efficiency projects.

### **Making an impression**

Even if those incentives weren't available, The Woods would have considered solar, Morrow said. The Woods wants to use renewable energy to help the environment and please the community, he said.

"We think the community will like it and maybe we can be a leader in getting people talking about solar as an option," Morrow said.

And while it's not the main reason for moving ahead with the solar project, Morrow said he thinks installation of the panels will be good for public perception.

Ramel said renewable energy does matter to the community according to a survey of 400 Whatcom County residents. Eighty-five percent of survey respondents expressed preference for doing business with companies that are working to save energy and 51 percent expressed a strong preference.

So far, Savage has received 98 percent positive feedback from customers regarding the North Fork's solar panels. The other 2 percent have said they don't like federal dollars being spent on solar panels for businesses. Savage's response to that frustration? It's either equip existing infrastructure to create power, or the power companies will raise rates to build new large power plants.

Stone doesn't know whether the panels will draw people to Mountain Veterinary Hospital, and that's not his reason for installing them.

"I think it's the environmentally right thing to do," he said. "I think it makes sense economically right now because energy prices are going up."

He also hopes his panels inspire others to see whether solar is right for them, a point Morrow and Savage also made.

"We are hoping we can serve as a model to people in Whatcom County and to show them that this can work here," Savage said.