

PEOPLE

North Fork Brewery going solar

by Brent Cole

Over the next two months, solar panels will be installed at the North Fork Brewery on Mount Baker Highway in Deming in an attempt to bring the business' energy bill down to zero. The solar project is the largest in the foothills, and one of, if not the largest in Whatcom County.

According to owner Vicki Savage, who runs the brewery with her husband Sandy, there will be a total of 40 panels on

a 20-foot metal railing structure. The panels are clear, "so they provide a rooftop." The output is eight kilowatts with 180 days of production a year – if the weather cooperates. This amounts to most of their electricity consumption year round.

Along with providing power for the North Fork, the solar energy will be sold back to the grid as well. Instead of just having one meter from Puget Sound Energy, they'll have two – one that goes forward and another that goes backward. If one of the panels is in the shade, the other will

still work, according to Savage. "It's almost like a Lego approach to solar panels," she said. "They each have their own cellular intelligence."

The North Fork's solar project will be installed by Bellingham-based Advanced Solar Energy. Four of the workers helping with the project live within a 30-mile radius of the restaurant, including Jeffrey Utter, of Deming, Nate Carlson, of Welcome, and Bellingham residents Eric Yurk and Teo Anderson.

Currently, the North Fork Brewery is still in the permit process, though the county has informed Savage they will expedite the permit processing for solar projects. Installation will take approximately five days, Savage said, and they hope to get started near the end of the month and be finished by the end of the year.

The structure will be installed on the east side of the building, adjacent to the parking lot. Unfortunately, four trees will have to be taken down in the process, though three of them are not in good shape. "It'll look like



The North Fork Brewery already takes part in the Community Energy Challenge, put on by local non-profits the Opportunity Council and Sustainable Connections. PHOTO BY BRENT COLE

the starship enterprise," Vicki said with a laugh.

The idea of going solar was "kicked around" by Vicki and Sandy for quite awhile. "It had been an idea floating around. We thought the project was so out of reach for us, it's one of those things that we kicked around and dismissed immediately."

It wasn't until Vicki impulsively walked into a store that sold solar equipment and quickly realized it could be a reality. The government is offering 30 percent back in the form of a rebate (via the stimulus) and interest rates are very low – making the

equipment easier to afford. "Stimulus money made it attainable," she said.

Still, it took them a couple months to commit to the project. "It was immediately attractive, but it took us a couple months of 'what are we doing.' We were scared. Like any small business, it's really frightening to commit," she said.

Vicki figures the investment will be paid off within nine years. From there, it'll be nothing but savings. "We're shooting for the moon, we're saying we want zero power bills. So, we're being very aggressive."

In the mean time, Vicki and Sandy can barely handle their enthusiasm. "We're just so excited. Some people have the mid-life crisis and they go out and buy the corvette. This is our mid-life crisis."

The North Fork Brewery and Beer Shrine is located at 6186 Mount Baker Highway in Deming and can be reached at (360) 599-2337, and online at www.northforkbrewery.com

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