

Alternative energy companies choosing Torrington

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By RONALD DEROSA

TORRINGTON — If alternative energy is the future, then Connecticut is a guiding light — and the city of Torrington, with a number of innovative, energy businesses, could potentially be a hub for that future.

The state government offers a number of different incentives which have lead the way nationally in the push to renewable energy, said Daniel Brdar, CEO of Danbury-based Fuel Cell Technologies.

In 2007, the legislature established the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund, offering programs that provide grants, rebates and tax credits to those who install cleaner energy systems in their businesses and homes, said Rep. Roberta Willis, D-64.

The state's fund is paid for by small portions of the consumers' electric bill which in total is around \$60 million, Willis said.

“If you wanted to put a solar panel on your home, the state would give you a rebate,” she said, “and you can have a solar installer, who is licensed and registered by the state, to install it.”

Since the fund passed last year — and with the costs of rising fuel — the number of applicants for the solar energy program have increased dramatically, Willis said.

Partnerships are often drawn between renewable energy companies and the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund, Willis said.

While the state is a leader in this regard they have not been ambitious enough in their efforts, said Roger Smith, spokesman for the Connecticut Clean Water Action.

“Programs are decent but are running pretty short of funding, and are provided essentially through surcharged on electricity, natural gas and oil,” he said. “The best way we can help people pay their bills is to help them fix up their homes and businesses to use less energy. Otherwise, we are sending a lot of money out of state with every dollar we spend on fossil fuels.”

More could obviously be done, Willis said, but Connecticut still is in the top five in the

nation in many energy fronts. The joint ventures within in-state companies could provide the ability to increase revenue utilizing specific energy technologies.

Fuel cells, one of the many technologies offered in the state, are a clean energy source that operates like a battery, except instead of storing energy, you feed it fuel and it makes energy, Brdar said. According to the company's website, fuel cells generate electricity unobtrusively without pollution.

"Korea is an example where they have identified fuel cells as one of 10 drivers in their economy," he said. "Part of their program of study is what's going on in Connecticut."

Installing fuel cells in homes, however, is not always a cheap option. Another Torrington company, Fitch Fuel Catalyst, has a quicker solution — despite being less green.

They have invented a method to utilize already in place boilers and furnaces — which require regular home heating oil — to generate as much heat by burning less fuel. Fitch Fuel installs a burner alongside the regular furnace that employs the use of a catalyst — which is a metal alloy — to redistribute the molecules of the combustion. said Director of Development Mickey Wiernasz. The unit then passes through a smaller nozzle generating a greater level of stack temperature using 10 to 20 percent less BTU energy, he said.

The product supports the oil industry, said President Michael Best, but it allows to use less oil than necessary.

Fitch Fuel Catalyst employs 25 people around the state, including an office in Lakeville and Torrington and benefits from the state's rebates for energy. Consumers who choose to install one of their units could receive a 50 percent rebate up to \$500, depending on adjusted gross income. The cost of the unit depends on the size of the house and furnace, ranging from \$700 to \$900.

As the state and towns continue initiatives for renewable energy, some towns in the area, such as Harwinton, already plan on receiving 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2010. Other towns, like Torrington and New Hartford, are part of a state initiative to reduce the municipalities' energy consumption by 20 percent.

One other company in Torrington, Optiwind, shows another technology initiative: wind power.

Located at the former Torrington Company building, Optiwind is currently seeking a the possibility of creating a wind turbine in Goshen to generate electricity. The company employs 14 people and expects that it will be able to hire 100 people from the area within the next two years.

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