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Bristol Catholic school soaking up rays from Heaven



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Pat McCarthy, Principal Janet Maloney and the Rev. Henry P. Zinno Jr. (left) stand amid the solar panel array. They all said it would be their one and only trip onto the roof.



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Scott Pickering (mailto:spickering@eastbaynewspapers.com)

Every school undergoes repairs, renovations or improvements during the summer. Few can match the changes at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School (<http://olmc-bristol.org/>). The Catholic school in the heart of historic Bristol installed 160 solar panels on the roof of its gymnasium and cafeteria, with final wiring and connections expected by September. When it's operational, the new system should generate enough electricity to power the entire school facility for 25 years. At today's rates, that's more than \$300,000 of "free" electricity. Technically, the school's electricity will not be free. Mount Carmel will be known as a distributive generator of electricity, which means it produces energy that feeds into the region's power grid. The school will receive energy credits for all the power it sends into the grid, and because it is expected to produce more power than the school consumes — last year, the school's electric bills totaled \$12,547 — it should negate any future bills. Though the energy is free, the system is not. Mount Carmel is spending more than \$190,000 on the panels, wiring and labor. All of the money is coming from state and federal sources. A \$52,440 grant came from the Rhode Island Renewable Energy Fund (<http://www.energy.ri.gov/renewable/ref/>) (generated from a surcharge on all Rhode Island energy bills), via the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation. An additional \$138,425 grant arrived via the federal Office of Energy Resources' Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (<http://www.energy.ri.gov/rggi/>). The grants were announced at the beginning of July, and within a couple of weeks a crane was lifting bundles of solar panels onto the Mount Carmel School roof. Days later, the roof was a symmetrical array of solar panels. Sitting low to the roof and angled south to maximize the sun's rays, the panels are invisible from the ground below. As the installation work continued last week, church leaders were beaming. From their perspective, the installation was swift, but the grant process was not. "There was a lot of heavy lifting to get this done, to meet the application requirements, to get through all the paperwork," said Pat McCarthy, a member of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church finance council who has been integral to the school solar project. Mr. McCarthy, now a manager of corporate project finance at Electric Boat in Groton, Conn., served as head of the Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources for three years. When the Rev. Henry P. Zinno Jr. learned about Mr. McCarthy's background, it didn't take long to put him in charge of the school project. "Without Pat's expertise, we would be up a creek without a paddle," Father Zinno said.

School has a good roof

Overseeing the project is Newport Renewables (<http://nptre.com/>), which has managed solar and other alternative energy projects throughout the region, and is co-owned by Bristol resident Paul Raducha. Newport Renewables actually suggested Mount Carmel apply for the grants, after they recognized potential in the school's large, flat and south-facing roof. Newport Renewables architecture engineer Derek Portugal has been overseeing installation at Mount Carmel, while Clem's Electric

(<http://www.clemselectric.com/pages/cfHome.cfm>) of Bristol is handling all the labor and wiring. This is the fifth time Clem's and Newport Renewables have worked together on a solar project. Mr. Portugal said the panels come with a 25-year warranty, which is why a flat roof is not the only requirement — you also need a relatively new roof that can last the 25 years. The Mount Carmel School roof is only a few years old, and the few repairs needed were all paid for by the state and federal grants. This is not Mount Carmel's first foray into solar energy or "green" initiatives. In 2009, the school installed a small solar panel that is essentially a weather station. The church and school also conducted an energy audit that led to widespread installation of energy-efficient lightbulbs. "I think those efforts, the fact that we had already installed solar energy, really helped our application," Father Zinno said.

Science students, look outside

Mount Carmel received the money under a grant program aimed specifically at educational institutions. As such, education is a key part of the program. The grant paid for Mount Carmel Principal Janet Maloney to attend a conference on solar energy and educational programming. A small kiosk is being installed inside the school, and middle school science students will be tracking the solar energy output and comparing it to real-time weather patterns throughout the school year. Principal Maloney is not only excited about the new technology, she's energized about green initiatives in general. "It's really time to evaluate all our energy uses," she said. Father Zinno is spiritually energized as well. "It's amazing to note," he said, "that we received word that our grant was being awarded on June 18, the same day as our Holy Father Pope Francis delivered his inspirational message on climate change (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/18/415429852/pope-francis-climate-change-a-principal-challenge-for-humanity>) and the environment." Our Lady of Mount Carmel School was not the only school in Rhode Island to receive solar energy grants. Others include Bay View Academy, Pennfield School, Moses Brown School and Harmony Hill School. The Mount Carmel team that collaborated to bring the solar project to Bristol includes Father Zinno, Principal Maloney and Mr. McCarthy, as well as civil engineer Adam Baron and church office manager Carol Viveiros.

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Mike Rego



Mike Rego has worked at East Bay Newspapers since 2001, helping the company launch The Westport Shorelines. He soon after became a Sports Editor, spending the next 10-plus years in that role before taking over as editor of The East Providence Post in February of 2012. To contact Mike to submit information, suggest story ideas or photo opportunities, etc., email mrego@eastbaynewspapers.com.

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