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Solar Panels Popular: New-Rochelle based firm says stimulus boosts product sales

By Allan Drury

The stimulus bill passed by Congress and signed by President Barack Obama provides enhanced incentives for solar energy, and that's lifted business at Mercury Solar Systems in New Rochelle.

Mercury President Jared Haines said the company has closed at least four deals to install solar panels on buildings since the stimulus bill was signed by Obama on Feb. 17. The number of calls from people interested in going solar has risen by about 400 percent, he said.

Haines said the company's call volume is usually highest during the summer months, when the hot weather drives up electricity bills. In the last two weeks, the phones have been ringing as often as they do during the summer, he said.

The federal government will provide a 30 percent tax credit for a homeowner who has a solar system installed, Haines said. Homeowners can also benefit from state tax breaks and a rebate from the New York State Energy and Research Development Authority.

The bill means that a homeowner who buys a \$40,000 system would pay \$9,000, Haines said. Before the stimulus package, the homeowner's share of that \$40,000 cost would have been \$13,000, he said.

At today's electricity rates, a homeowner can save about \$1,500 a year in electricity costs with a solar system, he said. That would mean a homeowner could recoup the \$9,000 cost in six years.

Businesses can also get a 30 percent tax credit for a system. But a key provision allows a business to take that benefit as a rebate instead of as a tax credit, Haines said. That's important because many businesses do not qualify for tax credits on their 2008 returns and probably will not qualify on their 2009 returns because they have so many write-offs due to the bad economy, he said.

"We've spoken to 2,000 people in the last year and half said they couldn't use the tax credit," Haines said. "This completely reopens the discussion with those 1,000 people. It's a huge catalyst to growing our business."

Mercury, which started in 2006, has 26 employees in New Rochelle and 14 at a new office in Mays Landing, N.J. Haines said he expects to have 80 workers within a year. The business is growing so quickly that he expects to soon move out of the offices on Coligni Avenue and into new offices in Larchmont.