

# The Saugerties Times

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## It's easy being green

by Crispin Kott and Gabrielle Compolongo

In a world where the cost of fuel is skyrocketing and environmental consciousness has become more than just a hippie ideal, more and more local people are looking into bringing alternative energy sources into their lives.

While discussing the merits of hybrid automobiles has perhaps taken the lead in water cooler conversation, a time-honored way of heating one's home is making something of a comeback.

Peter and Ann Tomasino are weekenders in Saugerties. The Merrick, Long Island-based couple built their house on Mary Ann Avenue five years ago as a respite from the rigors of a congested city life, with an eye on making it their permanent home upon retirement six years from now.



Nestled in a quiet development, with wooded mountain views through their windows and a sizeable lawn stretching out in the front, the Tomasinos house is very much a dream home. But as fuel costs continued to rise, the costs of maintaining their dream home became something of a nightmare.

"Certainly we've been watching the energy costs continue to grow," said Peter, an assistant vice president with Lake Success-based pharmaceutical company Aceto Corporation. Around a year ago, the Tomasinos began looking into ways of reducing the cost of their home, exploring electric heat and wind before settling on solar power as a cost-effective, environmentally conscious solution.

Solar energy has actually been around for centuries, with the means of harnessing it adapting through time. The early Greeks, Chinese and Native Americans utilized the natural heat of the sun by positioning their buildings to maximize absorption.

On the roof of the Tomasino home are four solar panels which draw energy from the sun for the primary use of heating their water, though they said there is some residual benefit felt in their home heating bill.

Solar water heaters started appearing in the United States in the 1890s, though they began to lose steam in the 1920s as what we now consider traditional fuel took the lead as it was considerably less expensive at the time.

But the tables are turning, both here and abroad. In Israel, 90 percent of all homes have solar hot water heaters. And if the Tomasinos story gets out, Saugerties may soon follow suit en masse.

And the Tomasinos story is getting out. Several weeks ago, Saugerties Green Energy Task Force chairperson Patti Kelly and a camera crew stopped by the Mary Ann Avenue home to film an episode of a public access television program soon to debut on Lighthouse TV23. Kelly quizzed the Tomasinos on the benefits they've seen since their new water heating system went into effect last November.

### **How it works**

First, the start-up costs. They're not quite as bad as you might imagine. After a local search proved unsuccessful, the Tomasinos settled on **Chatham-based SunDog Solar**, who helped design a system that would heat the water in the home for around \$18,000. But in the best possible way, that cost was only the beginning. Thanks to a low-interest loan from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, as well as substantial income tax breaks from the state and federal government, the Tomasinos were able to install their solar water

heating system for \$11,000. The Tomasinos said they expect they'll save that \$11,000 within five to seven years, with the solar panels likely to last around 25 years.

"When we began, oil was \$70 a barrel," said Peter. "Now it's well over \$100. We saved about 80 gallons of oil over last year (with the solar water heating system). It's beat all of my expectations."

"Some of our neighbors have already shown an interest," said Ann.

While Peter is able to stay out on Long Island with his job, Ann commutes into Manhattan each day where she is a sales representative with The Weeks Lerman Group, an office supply company. Suffice it to say, having a sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of the New York Metropolitan area is important to both of the Tomasinos.

One of the unique features of their home is a thermostat that can be controlled by telephone. That way, fuel isn't wasted when they're away, but the home can still be ready for their arrival.

"It also works with the air conditioning as well," said Ann. "They say that having a programmatic thermostat is one of the best things that you can do."

An intricate drainback system in their basement harnesses the solar energy and uses three different tanks to store around 300 gallons of solar heated water. A hot water circulator switch keeps the temperature at around 170 degrees, though Peter said it could get as hot as 200.

The Tomasinos have worked to make the rest of their home as energy efficient as well. Thanks to a lighting system and appliances such as their refrigerator, microwave and washer/dryer, the Mary Ann Avenue home received Energy Star certification from the federal government program. Their home features a plaque and a door mat with the recognizable logo as a result.

While the process proved to be something of an uphill climb, the Tomasinos said they haven't had any regrets about making their home more energy efficient and environmentally conscious.

"I wouldn't look back," Peter said. "I think we did the right thing."

The public access show featuring the Tomasinos home hosted by Patti Kelly is expected to air on TV 23 some time this month.

The task force, which was formed in early 2007 by the town board, hopes to bring the show will help green-minded Saugertiesians make the jump from sympathy to reality by showing how their neighbors did it. In addition to the Tomasino family, the show has filmed segments with the Skaar family, also on Mary Anne Avenue, and at the Kiwanis Ice Arena.

The Skaars have gone completely solar with their home, and the Tomasinos use solar power to heat their water. Kelly says the Skaar family have been solar for over eight years with the cost of \$15,000. Half was paid by federal and state grants and they now have a higher appraisal on their home because, without paying taxes the higher. "You don't have to go whole hog, if you want to use solar. You can use solar to do different components of your home," said Kelly. "Payback [how long it takes for energy savings to offset the startup costs] for two houses we are going to is not that bad. When you do the solar improvement to your house, the value of your house goes up, but you don't pay taxes. That was an interesting thing to know, and another thing to encourage people to go solar. It's a real benefit."

While the upfront investment for the solar technology can be intimidating, Kelly says using alternative energy is not just for the rich. NYSERDA aids in funding those who wish to improve their property.