

## Solar power gives Fremont student gardeners extended season



Michael Bliss, center, of Seacoast Area Renewable Energy Initiative, lifts a solar collector to be installed at a greenhouse Saturday at the Ellis School in Fremont with help from science teacher John Hermann, left, and Steve Condon of ReVision Energy. JASON SCHREIBER PHOTO

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By JASON SCHREIBER

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FREMONT — The growing season may be coming to an end for most gardeners, but middle-school students at Ellis School will be planting lettuce seeds soon and should have a winter crop by January.

The season will be extended for the school's educational greenhouse after a solar hot water system was installed Saturday as part of a project that began a year ago, thanks to donated labor and materials, volunteers and a \$5,000 grant from Lowe's "Toolbox for Education" program.

"There are so many different lessons this can give to the students," said Jen Rydeen, vice president of the school's Parent-Teacher Association.

Rydeen, who applied for the grant on behalf of the PTA, was one of several volunteers on hand Saturday as the system was installed to provide a sustainable method of heating the greenhouse planting beds in the winter.

ReVision Energy of Brentwood and Seacoast Area Renewable Energy Initiative (SEAREI) teamed up with the school to help design and install the system. They also offered skilled volunteers and donated resources for the project.

ReVision Energy installs solar hot water and solar electricity systems for homes, businesses, schools and nonprofits.

SEAREI is a nonprofit organization whose volunteers encourage the use of renewable energy and assist with local projects.

"It's an energy raising," said Michael Bliss of Portsmouth, a SEAREI board member and founder. SEAREI is an organization modeled after a traditional "barn raiser," where a community comes together based on the principle of paying it forward.

Saturday's work included the installation of two solar collectors, a pump station and a tank.

John Hermann, the school's seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher who oversees the greenhouse and has worked closely with ReVision Energy and SEAREI on the project, will tie the system into the planting beds with help from students.

Hermann, an organic farmer who enjoys sharing his skills with the school community, uses the greenhouse to give students a hands-on gardening experience. They plant the seeds and care for the vegetables with his

help.

Students also hold plant sales and are making garlic powder for the school's kitchen. Hermann hopes the winter lettuce crop can be used in salads.

"It's exciting. There's really good community support," he said. "I try to make sure all the kids get out here. Some kids don't have gardens. They've never eaten a tomato and never eaten broccoli off a stalk."

Hermann wants students to get the lettuce seeds planted this month, and with the solar hot water system in place, he said the school should have a winter crop of lettuce by January.

Other vegetables will be planted by early March followed by flowers in April.

Heather Fournier, who works for ReVision Energy and is a Fremont resident with children in the school, said the system would have cost close to \$12,000 if it were installed in a house.

ReVision Energy donated the tank and collectors for the project and hopes to work on similar projects at other schools.

"It's nice to put your goals at home," she said of the greenhouse project.

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