



## Long Island's True 'Solar Pioneer'



**Wantagh, N.Y. –** We spoke with Dan Sabia, founder of Built Well Solar (<http://www.builtwell.com>), to learn about his pioneering role in the beginning of Long

Island's solar energy industry.

**Solar Power World: Why do you think solar is so important?**

**Sabia:** As a retired U.S. Army officer with the rank of Major, I was called to Ground Zero after the Twin Towers fell because I have expertise in nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. The Trade Center

is minutes from Long Island – this attack took place in my backyard. After witnessing the devastation, I knew there had to be less dependence on foreign oil. I believe solar is the answer for America's – and the planet's – future.

**SPW: How did Built Well Solar begin?**

**Sabia:** The local utility was offering a "Solar Pioneer" financial incentive for people willing to install solar on the homes. It was an effort to relieve strain on the local grid, since Long Islanders have few local power plants and the utility has to buy energy elsewhere. I volunteered. Mine was the first 10-kW residential system on Long Island. With 30 years of general contracting and facilities management experience and a college degree in construction/ architecture, I was able to install the system on my home myself. Then I installed one on a friend's home, then a neighbor's, and so on. Before I knew it, I was in business. I also oversaw the first PV installation on a school district on Long Island.

**SPW: What challenges does your business encounter?**

**Sabia:** One of our challenges is to overcome myths about solar energy. The payback here is about 3.5 to 4.5 years for a PV purchase, but some customers think it will take 10 years or more. Customers sometimes think solar is expensive, so again we have to explain the facts: PV system costs have gone down a lot. And, on Long Island, we still have utility rebate incentives, a 30% federal tax credit, a property tax exemption, no sales tax on a residential purchase and a 25% New York State tax credit up to \$5,000. All that makes solar affordable for homeowners. For businesses, it's a no-brainer because of the added benefit of accelerated depreciation. There's never been a better time to purchase a PV system on Long Island.

**SPW: What's the Long Island solar business environment like?**

**Sabia:** When I started, I'd say it was like

Every step of the way,  
we overcome the  
myths out there by  
educating people.

the Wild West. In 2001, there were just mine and one other solar company (the latter since folded, so ours is the only original). By 2010 there were about 50, many from out of town trying to capitalize on the utility incentives. Still, I never felt that it's a competition. Our colleagues in the Long Island industry are a stand-up group of solid companies, many in business for some time now. We all work together for the common good. There are millions of rooftops on Long Island, and only about 9,000 have solar installations. There's plenty of business for everyone.

**SPW: What's it like working with your customers?**

**SPW:** Most all of our customers are just the greatest people. Some of them fax me their electric bills every month, just to say thanks. Some invite me to speak to their children's classes about solar. Some just stand there with a cup of coffee, watching their meters go backwards, and call me up to tell me about it.

One customer who stands out is New York City police detective Steven McDonald. He was shot in July of 1986, which left him quadriplegic. His home was converted to all electric to accommodate an elevator, breathing, life support and other apparatus. We installed solar on his home, largely as a donation and a true labor of love. Meeting Steven was an inspiration. He is the most optimistic person I have ever met. It was a privilege to help him and his family. **SPW**

