

# Turning Green, Schools Lead in Solar Energy

By LINDA SASLOW

**I**F Dan Sabia had not noticed a rebate offer on his own LIPA bill almost five years ago, the Carle Place School District might never have become a local pioneer in solar energy.

But prodded by Mr. Sabia, who is the director of facilities and operations for the district, Carle Place has become Long Island's first school district to install a solar power system, under the LIPA Solar Pioneer Program. In January, officials of the Long Island Power Authority and the Carle Place School District dedicated the solar energy system, which has been in place for a little more than a year and has, by the district's reckoning, saved it thousands of dollars.

The process started in 2002 when Mr. Sabia, of North Bellmore, read on his LIPA bill that he could get a \$60,000 rebate if he added solar panels to his house.

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**A district lowers its electric bills by more than \$10,000.**

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"At first I thought it was too good to be true," said Mr. Sabia. "But when I got my rebate and then learned that if a school district signed onto the program it could also get reimbursed for energy-savings measures, I knew it was something worth investigating."

Under Mr. Sabia's guidance, the district applied for a rebate and had \$200,000 applied toward the installation of five photovoltaic solar systems in its three schools. In its first year, the solar panels lowered the district's electric bills by more than \$10,000, district officials said; its lighting bill alone had been \$200,000 a year.

Johnson Controls, the Syosset company that installed the system, also recommended 17 energy-performance changes for district buildings. The largest cost-saving measure was the replacement of 5,000 light bulbs to more energy-

efficient fluorescent bulbs; the district says that change has already saved it \$60,000.

Mr. Sabia said that Johnson Controls provided \$2.5 million worth of work for no direct outlay of taxpayer money; the company is being paid for its work over 18 years from the district's savings on utility bills. Johnson Controls received \$164,000 the first year, said Danny Haffel, its director of business development.

After payments to Johnson Controls, Mr. Sabia said, the district had a surplus of about \$17,000. Over the 18 years it pays off the work done, the district projects that the solar system will generate a surplus of nearly a half-million dollars.

LIPA's Solar Pioneer Program, initiated in 2000, has provided almost \$23 million in rebates for the installation of 859 photovoltaic systems throughout Long Island — in homes, commercial buildings and nonprofit and government offices. LIPA continues to offer rebates for solar systems, based on the number of watts.

Following the experience in Carle Place, other school districts are investigating the benefits of solar power. Mr. Sabia said representatives from about a dozen Long Island districts had looked at the Carle Place system.

Michael Lowndes, a LIPA spokesman, said that the Malverne school district recently installed a solar power system and that three other districts — Smithtown, East Hampton and Shoreham-Wading River — had been approved for rebates.

Carle Place, meanwhile, has added the study of solar systems to its fifth-grade curriculum. W. Michael Mahoney, the superintendent, said that joining the LIPA program had been beneficial in three ways.

"First, we have drastically reduced our electric bills," he said. "In addition, we are reducing greenhouse gas emissions by avoiding the use of fossil fuels to generate electricity. And the third part is that this has provided us an opportunity to educate our students about solar energy and alternative energy resources."

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Steve Cooper

**MONEY SAVERS** Dan Sabia on the roof of Carle Place High School taking a look last month at newly installed solar panels.