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Longtime business joins solar-power trend

Chet's uses solar power in Habitat home

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For the Journal*

Although Chet's Plumbing and Heating Inc. is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, the Stevens Point-based company is a relative newcomer to the market for solar-powered technologies.

Chet's began installing solar-powered hot water heaters about a year ago after its president, Pete Laskowski, saw an unmet demand for the eco-friendly alternative to conventional heating systems.

The demand came when another contractor, who Laskowski had been working with occasionally for about four years, stopped installing the systems in the area.

In the year since Chet's Plumbing and Heating began installing the systems, Laskowski said he has noticed a "very positive" response from eco-conscious homeowners looking to save some money on their energy bill.

He said a wide variety of people have inquired about the solar-powered heaters, from elderly couples looking to save on energy costs to young earth-conscious couples.

"There does not seem to be a rhyme or reason," he said.

Laskowski, who took over the business from his father, Chet, five years ago with his sister Sheri, estimates he installed 20 systems last year. About 70 percent of those systems were retrofitted into existing houses.

Chet's also had a booth at the Midwest Renewable Energy Fair in Custer in June, where the company displayed a model solar-powered unit. Laskowski said fairgoers were "very responsive" and that many were talking with the company about installing systems.

The systems have few components -- solar panels to absorb the sun's rays and a storage tank that preheats the home's potable water and piping.

Laskowski said the configuration of the system is flexible as long as the solar-collecting panels are placed facing within 20 degrees of south.

The cost of a solar-powered system can deter some, but rebates and federal tax incentives are making the systems more affordable.

Laskowski said an average solar-powered system for a residential home costs between \$8,000 and \$10,000.

Rebates and tax incentives offered by the federal government go a long way toward reducing costs, he said.

In some cases, as much as 65 percent of a system's total cost can be covered by those incentives.

To qualify for the maximum amount of the incentives and other discounts, a homeowner's energy provider must participate in the state's Focus on Energy program, which gives financial incentives to businesses and residents who install energy-efficient technologies.
