

## Melink toasts energy dream: \$0 electric bills

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Steve Melink has achieved something most businesses and homeowners only dream about: The monthly electric bills on his 30,000-square-foot building in Union Township have been \$0.00 the past five months.

Melink, president and owner of Melink Corp., believes his 5-year-old energy-efficient building is one of the few buildings in the country to achieve net zero energy - the state of producing as much energy as it consumes. The achievement comes from efforts including turning down thermostats, turning off lights and increasing insulation. At the same time, Melink generates electricity from about a dozen solar collectors on the roof and 20-acre grounds.

Depending on how much sun shines each month, Melink Corp. can even earn several hundred dollars in credits on its Duke Energy bill for electricity it produces and puts on the utility's system.

Today, Melink Corp. is celebrating its energy-saving accomplishments with an open house at the company's office and plant off Round Bottom Road. Several hundred people are expected at the business that provides commercial heating and ventilating equipment and services and develops solar projects.

One of its best-known projects is the \$11 million solar canopy at the Cincinnati Zoo, nearly four acres of solar collectors that make up one of the largest urban solar displays in the nation.

Melink says businesses and homeowners can achieve meaningful reductions in their energy use, too, simply by turning down thermostats, using more efficient lighting and adding insulation.

"You don't have to wait for some future solution," he says. "You can make meaningful reductions in energy use by doing common-sense things."

Melink is one of the region's most vocal evangelists for renewable energy and sustainable building. He made net zero energy a goal for his building when it opened five years ago, after hearing about a challenge from the architectural industry to develop such buildings by 2030.

"We decided we wanted to be a leader rather than a follower," Melink says.

The Melink building, designed to maximize solar heating and lighting, was built initially for \$2.5 million in 2006. Since then Melink estimates that his company has spent another \$750,000, or \$25 a square foot, on energy efficiency and renewable energy systems. They include a windmill, a geothermal system to tap the ground's natural heating and cooling and solar hot-water heating system attached to the building's south wall.

He estimates the improvements will save about \$75,000 annually in electric and other energy costs. That's a 10-year payback on his investment, but Melink says that timetable will be reduced as energy prices increase.

In 2006, the building was the first in Ohio to achieve "gold certification" for energy and environmental design from the U.S. Green Building Council. Last year, it earned the even higher "platinum" certification.

Pursuing renewable energy and sustainability also has been good for Melink's business. The company's employment increased from 65 to 108 this year, and revenues are expected to reach \$30 million, nearly double last year's \$17 million.

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Melink's sustainability initiatives aren't limited to the building. His company operates a fleet of Toyota Prius hybrids, and he offers an incentive to employees who buy hybrids for their personal vehicles.

Next week he plans to begin installing batteries in the building that will allow the company to store some of the electricity it generates to further reduce its peak energy bills. Eventually, he wants to introduce other features such as recycling water from a retention pond for non-drinking uses.

"There's not one silver bullet," Melink says.

From the desk of Mike Boyer