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## **Solaqua offers alternative energy training**

By Jamie Larson

CHATHAM — The only company in Columbia County that builds alternative energy products has started a training program to help create the green collar workforce needed to reach the state's energy independence goals.

Gov. David Paterson has said he wants 45 percent of all the state's electric power to come from improved efficiency and renewable sources by the year 2015. The first phase of the Solaqua Solar Thermal Center project in Chatham has received support from the governor for its plan to use state and community colleges to train contractors, architects and students how to install solar-thermal heating systems.

One of the governor's major concerns about the state's energy future, relayed to Solaqua through Paterson's energy advisors, is the lack of professionally trained alternative energy equipment installers. Solaqua President Jody Rael said their educational program will help bring those within the construction industry — as well as new workers — together to understand how they can incorporate renewable resources into their projects.

The courses were first offered at Ulster County Community College, where they will continue later this semester. They have already expanded the program and will be holding classes with Bronx, Hudson Valley and Columbia-Greene community colleges. They are offering a one-day overview, as well as a three-day intensive training course. The classes are taught by industry professionals Peter Skinner, president of E2G, who helps write the test to certify alternative energy technicians, and Betsy Ferris Wyman, vice president of sales for SunDog Solar.

The New York State Energy Research Development Authority (NYSERDA) has been issuing grants for similar technical training in electricity-producing renewable sources. Solaqua said it has heard that a grant for heat technology training is in the works and when it becomes available it will apply to run a program through Columbia-Greene.

A sizable percentage of homes are heated with electricity, but because other heat sources — like natural gas and propane — are used, renewable heat sources are not at the top of NYSERDA's list.

The Solaqua project is an offshoot of the Sundog Solar, Kling Magnetics Inc. company, off Route 295 outside of Chatham.

The training classes are only the first step in a 10-year plan to convert the large old factory and mill on the company's property into a state-of-the-art solar-thermal technology factory, trade school, arts and cultural center, restaurant and brewery, and eventually an experimental green housing community.

The project is substantial — estimated to cost more than \$4 million — but in spite of the economic recession SunDog's business has continued to grow. Rael claims that revenue for the company has doubled every year for the past three years and boasts that the company signed 14 new contracts. He says SunDog is essentially running as a non-profit, with all its revenue going to the Solaqua project.

SunDog's sister business, Kling Magnetics, has seen a drop in its magnet sales, but Rael says the renewable energy industry is doing surprisingly well in the current economy, saying that at the moment it seems recession-proof.

The next round of classes at Ulster County Community College will be held in April and Solaqua officials are discussing possibly holding the first course at Columbia-Greene Community College during the summer session.

For more information on courses or the Solaqua project, contact SunDog Solar, Kling Magnetics at 518-392-4000.