

# Register-Star

## Dems focus on alternative energy, small biz and agriculture

*Annual picnic held in Greenport*

By Andrew Amelinckx

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GREENPORT—The annual Columbia County Democratic Committee picnic on Sunday saw a focus on alternative energy, small business and agriculture, a change of pace from the regular roster of politicians that have spoken in years past.

According to Christopher Nolan, the organization's chair, the reason for the change was due to the "terrible" economy. And, he said, "because the Democrats are very concerned" with small businesses and jobs.

The picnic, held at the Federation of Polish Sportsmen in Greenport, was a bit rainy but that didn't seem to affect attendance as around 75 people gathered to talk politics, eat and drink and listen to speakers who represented a number of local businesses.

Jody Rael, founder and president of SunDog Solar at SOLAQUA, an alternative energy consultation and installation company located in Chatham spoke about his commitment to the area. "I've hired eight people since May," he said. "All the money coming in has been going to hiring people."

Rael said that with the current economy he has had to fight the urge to lay people off, but has instead been following his heart. "The other side of my brain keeps saying 'go for it', and we have," he said.

Rael, who has an electric car—charged at work and home by solar power—said that it was vital that everyone do their part.

"We have to go off carbon," he said, citing climate change.

Betsy Ferris Wyman, SunDog Solar's vice president, provided a different perspective. She said that right now, with a number of tax credits, both on the state and federal level, currently available, there wasn't a better time to convert to solar, which can save consumers money over the long term.

She said SunDog represented "the face of the economy" since it was "a clean energy business."

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.

"This is where the jobs are going to come from," she said. And in order to ensure that there are green collar workers, SunDog has begun a training program through community colleges to teach people how to install solar-thermal heating systems.



The 57th annual Columbia County Democratic Committee Picnic Sunday at the Federation of Polish Sportsmen in Greenport featured a number of speakers, including local business people and Assemblyman Tim Gordon (I-108th). Andrew Amelinckx/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers



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"I'm a farmer and a Democrat," the next speaker, Derek Grout, told those gathered. He is the co-owner and co-founder with Tom Crowell of Harvest Spirits, a micro-distillery located on his family's apple farm, Golden Harvest, in Valatie.

Grout said that distilling allows for an alternative use of their apples, something necessary when cider apples only fetch 5 cents a pound commercially, as well as the fact that major juice companies, including Dole, are using Chinese apples for their juice concentrate.

Harvest Spirits bottles 2,000 cases a year of their Core vodka, which Grout says is a "tree to bottle" product and has been receiving awards from "Los Angeles to Chicago."

The company has begun production of a pear brandy with the fruit coming from the Fix Brother's Farm in Livingston.

Grout said their business is helping to show other young farmers in the area that they too can survive.

"I want to preserve our farm heritage and way of life," he said.

Nancy Gordon, a documentary filmmaker turned businesswoman, spoke about the impact of the economy on her business Hudson-based HAVE Inc., a purveyor of multi-media products and services that has been in business for 32 years.

She said the company went from 15 employees when it began to a high of 70, but due to economic conditions is now down to 30 employees.

Gordon said that the county tended to concentrate on trying to bring new business into the area, but didn't do as much about trying to keep already established businesses in place.

The final guest of the day and the only politician to speak was Assemblyman Tim Gordon, I-Bethlehem.

Nolan called Tim Gordon "a straight shooter" and pointed out he wasn't even from the same political party, but that the county Democrats "have supported him and will continue to support him."

Tim Gordon, who is on the committees for small business, agriculture and energy, said that these areas often crossover from one-to-the-other.

"Nothing occurs in a vacuum," he said.

As a case in point he said that he had helped Harvest Spirits. Gordon said that after a new law was passed allowing for farmers to distill small amounts of liquor and host tours and tastings, he had spoken with the State Liquor Authority on the company's behalf in order to facilitate the process of getting their license. "I made a heartfelt plea," he said.

Tim Gordon also spoke on the need to continue to promote alternative energy. He said that New York State currently relies on natural gas for its energy, which he said was cleaner than other energy sources. "It's not good enough," he said. "It's time to go further. SOLAQUA's doing it."

He said he has sponsored or co-sponsored a number of bills related to the issue.

Being that it was a political event, political issues abounded, the biggest discussion concerning itself with this November's elections.

Three candidates for the State Supreme Court were also on hand Sunday. Judge Rachel Kretser of Albany, John Stegmayer from Saugerties and Judge James Gilpatrick from Kingston were all in attendance and are all vying for Justice Anthony Kane's seat in the Third Judicial District. Kane is retiring this year.

A number of towns in the county have full or nearly full slates of Democratic candidates this year, including Ancram, Copake, Germantown, Taghkanic, Stuyvesant and Claverack.

According to Nolan, it was uncommon for so many towns to have full slates. He felt that their party would do well come the election.

"The people we're backing are all highly qualified individuals," he said, adding that they aren't running for the sake of self-interest.