

## Local company an example of expanding solar system



Art Illman/For Wicked Local

**Mike Richards, left, and Matthew Robichaud, both graduates of Assabet Valley Tech, work at New England Clean Energy.**

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**By Paul Crocetti/Staff writer**

HUDSON — In the beginning, a Hudson-based solar installation company had a cast of one.

When Mark Durrenberger started what is now New England Clean Energy in 2006, it was just him. The company, formerly New England Breeze Solar, now has about 15 employees, including several graduates of Assabet Valley Regional Technical High School in Marlborough, and is part of an ever-growing industry.

It was a little slow when Matthew Robichaud first started working for the company four years ago.

“Now it’s work every day,” said Robichaud, who grew up in Marlborough and studied electrical wiring at Assabet Valley Tech.

The company primarily installs solar electric systems, but also does solar hot water systems. The primary customers are homeowners, but New England Clean Energy has also installed systems at small and medium-sized businesses, including a Christmas tree farm in Grafton and a private school in Charlton.

About four installations a month is common, though the work does slow down in the winter. A typical home installation takes two or three people about three to four days.

Mike Richards, who also grew up in Marlborough and studied electrical wiring at Assabet, said every day brings something new, with each house different from the next.

“Typically our customers are happy for us to show up,” said Richards, 22, who has been with the company for three years and worked on a little more than 100 installations. “They’re excited to get going.”

Following the solar panel installation, residences typically break even in seven years, and businesses in five. The system will then normally last another 20 to 30 years, with virtually no maintenance. In 30 to 50 years, one element, an inverter that converts direct current power from the solar panels to alternating current power for the building, needs to be replaced, usually after 15 years.

When residents see a smaller bill because of the panels, they often try to lower it even more through their amount of electric use.

“It’s a really neat thing to see,” said Durrenberger, who is also president of the company.

Durrenberger loves meeting new customers, teaching them about solar and seeing them happy after an installation.

“It’s just awesome to be part of the growing business,” Durrenberger said.

The state now has 71,500 employees working at about 5,000 clean energy companies, according to the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center. The state’s clean energy economy grew by 11.2 percent from July 2011 to July 2012.

New England Clean Energy plans to continue to grow, but with caution.

“We’re fairly careful, so we don’t overextend ourselves,” said Durrenberger, who abhors the idea of a layoff and adds that his company has no debt.

The company is looking for a solar hot water employee and another licensed electrician to be on the solar electric crew.

New England Clean Energy, at 43 Broad St. in Hudson, pretty much sticks to Middlesex and Worcester counties for its installations. The top piece of feedback Durrenberger gets is that customers love the crews.

Robichaud, 22, who has participated in about 120 installations, said he enjoys the job.

“I always wanted to do electrical work,” Robichaud said. “Being outside - I can’t complain about that.”

Richards and Robichaud have actually been good friends since they were young children. Robichaud, having been at the company for a year before his friend started, put in a good word for Richards before he was hired.

Robichaud returned to Assabet recently, for what else, but the installation of a solar panel system. Current students actually did the work as he supervised.

“It was pretty interesting, teaching the teachers for once,” Robichaud said.

*For more information, visit [newenglandcleanenergy.com](http://newenglandcleanenergy.com).*