

Feature

TREND

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Solar hot water helps the planet and your wallet

By Lauren Siegler

Trend Editor

As cooler weather approaches, the use of warm water increases. With rising fuel prices, this can be an expensive season for apartment and building owners, where a large amount of water is used.

One option that owners may want to consider is solar hot water. Alan Rushforth is the owner of Rushforth Solar in Byrn Mawr, which designs and installs solar hot water systems throughout the Philadelphia and Delaware Valley region.

"I installed my first system 25 years ago," Rushforth said, explaining that he focuses on commercial systems in apartment buildings, hotels, nursing homes and Laundromats.

"Commercial [business] is bigger [than residential]," Rushforth said. "The equipment is different, it is bigger. I am trying to concentrate on one thing."

Solar hot water saves electricity, gas and oil by using solar energy to heat water. The heated water is stored in a tank next to a traditional hot water heater. The heater is given preheated water, rather than cold water, therefore using less fuel to warm the water.

"It can cut fuel use by half," Rushforth said, "And the system pays for itself in about five to seven years."

Other than the financial benefits, there is

the added bonus that solar energy is better for the environment.

"It leaves less carbon footprints," Rushforth said. "It's clean energy."

Rushforth, one of only two solar thermal installers in the Philadelphia area who is certified by the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners, got into the business a few years ago when he became "slightly retired" from the apartment industry.

"I dove into my passions, and solar energy is one of them," Rushforth said. "Solar hot water made sense, and commercial solar hot water made even more sense. There are few other companies that do commercial. My biggest competition is the price of oil."

Those interested in solar hot water should consider a few things, including if there is space in their building for a system.

A large rooftop is needed for the solar panels that collect the solar energy. Another necessity is a decent-sized space in the basement or storage area for the water tank, which can vary in size depending on the amount of hot water that is used. Also, the building must have a central hot water system.

Steven Ettinger, treasurer for the Elkins Court Condo Association, had Rushforth install a solar hot water system for the condos in July 2008.

"It's unbelievable," Ettinger said, noting

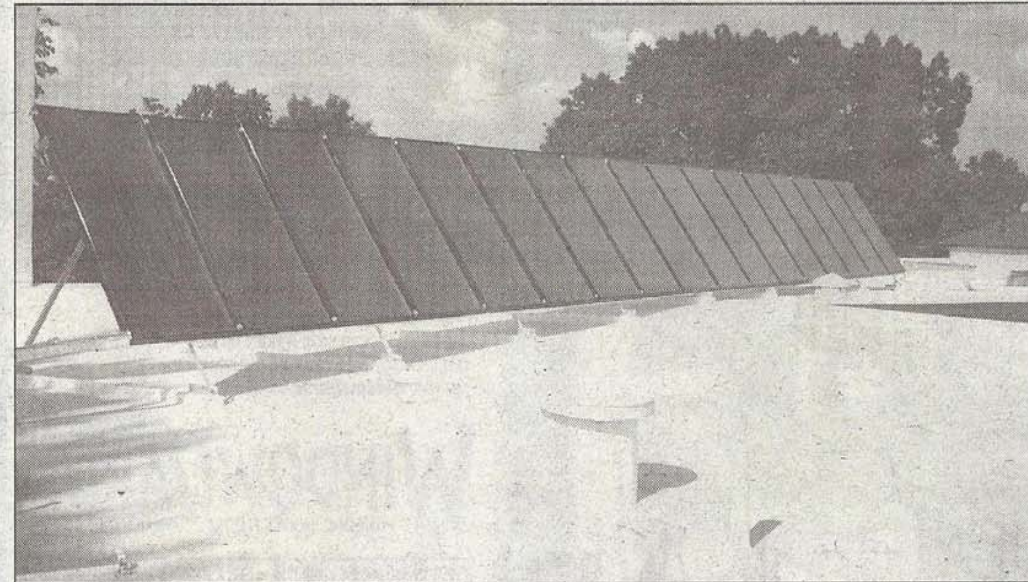


Photo courtesy of Alan Rushforth

Solar panels, like these on the roof of the Elkins Court Condominiums, are part of the solar hot water system. Solar hot water uses solar energy to preheat water before it goes into a water heater, thus lowering the amount of fuel to heat it.

that last month 42 people took hot showers and the bill was only \$85. "I like that when I take a hot shower, it's free. The hot part is free."

Although Rushforth has not seen too many commercial buildings using solar hot water, he feels that its popularity will grow in the coming years.

"We are definitely starting to create a market," Rushforth said. "We want to educate [building] owners and show them that this is viable, this can work."

Rushforth hopes the solar hot water business, and his company, will continue to expand.

"I'd like to grow, but I want to keep the quality of the systems very high," he said. "I am partially on an environmental mission. I'd like to set examples for other companies."

Rushforth Solar is located at 3700 Darby Road, Bryn Mawr. For more information, call 610-520-1968 or visit www.rushforthsolar.com.