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Expanding energy options

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Earlier this year, the City of North Vancouver became the fourth municipality in the country to earn a Milestone 5 designation for its efforts in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

To qualify for such an award, a city must comply with the criteria set out by the Partners for Climate Change — a joint initiative by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives.

Such a title, however, does not mean North Van is as green as it can be. In 2005, the city established aggressive targets of a 20-per-cent reduction in corporate emissions and a six-per-cent drop in community emissions. The addition of a new city library, a growing corporate fleet and an increase in population posed reduction challenges and emission levels have remained unchanged in the city since 1995.

At a meeting on April 18, council unanimously supported a revised corporate reduction plan that aims to see a 25-per-cent drop from 2007 levels, in addition to a 15-per-cent community reduction. A host of emission-reducing avenues have been discussed to meet targets, including the potential for low-interest loans for energy retrofits in buildings such as the ones offered in Vancouver, and the promotion of solar energy options. The city has been a proponent of solar energy in the past, having installed 120 solar panels on the roof of the library which are connected to the Lonsdale Energy Corporation. When there is enough heat from the sun, they become a priority energy source in the system, helping to heat more than 20 buildings in the Central and Lower Lonsdale areas.

As part of its sustainable city dialogues, the city hosted a “Solar Energy 101” discussion to look at the feasibility of installing solar panels.

Discussed at the meeting were the two types of solar energy: solar hot water and solar photovoltaic.

Solar hot water is the process of using energy from the sun to heat liquid and warm the water and space in one’s house. Solar photovoltaic, on the other hand, is using light from the sun to produce electricity. The most common form of solar energy is solar hot water. To install solar panels at a home, a typical

system needs about six metres of space and a sloped south-facing roof with little interference from trees. The District of North Vancouver offers its residents an online solar application that assesses whether a home is suitable for a solar hot water panels. The city does not yet offer any such tool.

The average solar hot watersystem will cost \$6,000 to \$8,000. In a newer home, the price will be a bit cheaper; older homes that need retrofits will cost more. Mayor Darrell Mussatto, a solar panel owner, told The Outlook he wants to see more incentives for those interested in installing solar panels on their homes. The city already requires all new buildings and houses to have the proper conduits for solar panels in place, but Mussatto believes the city should also expedite the permit process for those interested in doing such retrofits.

“What I’d like to see happen is those people get to jump the queue,” says Mussatto. “We need to offer incentives for people to use it because we can’t finance it. That’s up the federal and provincial governments.”

Solar BC, a province-wide organization devoted to providing education and incentives for solar energy, is currently testing the mayor’s house to determine the yearly savings from his panels. His home is one of 15 in B.C. participating in such a program.

David Thomson, a solar panel owner and moderator at the “Solar Energy 101” meeting, told The Outlook he believes solar energy is a great step to take only after other energy saving options have been done. Sealing cracks in the home, replacing windows and furnaces and better roof insulation are all options one should investigate prior to thinking about solar panels.

Once a home is ready for solar energy, he says the savings can be significant.

“I’ve noticed a drop of about 20 per cent on my gas bill, and in the summer my bill is next to nothing,” says Thomson, a North Van resident.

For information on the city’s sustainable city dialogues, visit www.cnv.org.