Third Sun Solar: From Start-Up to National Solar Player (Athens, OH)

Third Sun Solar is a company built on the premise that advanced energy solutions are necessary not only to reduce the impact of human energy needs on the environment, but also to promote local business growth and job creation. Third Sun Solar began after owners Geoff and Michelle Greenfield built a new home in Athens County, Ohio that went off the power grid in 1997. To provide power to their home, they utilized solar and wind; this experience led them to create their business of installing solar and wind power systems.

Third Sun Solar has sold, designed, and installed more than 300 solar and wind systems since 1997. Though the Greenfields initially financed Third Sun by taking a second mortgage on their home and putting all their assets on the line, their business has regenerated its own income. Sales have grown rapidly, allowing the business to expand both its number of staff and its scale of projects. Revenues have increased by 619% since 2011, and the company has been recognized as Ohio’s 12th fastest growing company, advancing Third Sun Solar from a start-up business to a national player in photovoltaic (PV) solar system installation. As of 2013, the company consists of 20 staff members, including Geoff and Michelle, three installers certified by the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) and one NABCEP-certified technical sales representative. Geoff Greenfield serves as an expert on the NABCEP, an organization that sets the standards and test criteria for national certification.

While Third Sun remains committed to installing residential power systems, larger projects involving institutional and community sectors have contributed to revenue growth. Such projects

Geoff and Michelle Greenfield. Photo credit: Third Sun Solar.
include installing solar power systems for a 70-unit completely “green” condominium project in Columbus and for a 10-unit super-energy-efficient low-income housing complex in Fayette County. Housing units such as these provide a glimpse of the rapidly expanding market for solar, wind, and other types of alternative energy. Third Sun Solar has also recently completed a large installation on the roof of the Kent State University Field House, and has recently put online a megawatt-scale installation for a large insurance company in Springfield, Ohio.

The solar project in Springfield will supply clean energy—the largest of its kind in the Springfield-Dayton area—at the offices of Assurant Specialty Property, one of Springfield’s largest employers. According to Assurant, the solar installation translates to a reduction of more than 1,400 tons of CO₂, or the equivalent of planting more than 33,000 trees, or more than 280 acres of pine forest. The crews working on the project installed more than 6,200 solar panels on the roof, as well as atop 15 new solar carports in the parking area.

Solar shade canopies at Assurant Specialty Property in Springfield, Ohio. The 1.76 megawatt project is expected to produce more than 1.9 million kilowatt hours of solar power each year. Photo credit: Third Sun Solar.

In 2012, Third Sun Solar moved out of the Ohio University Innovation Center business incubator into a refurbished headquarters on West Union Street in Athens. The larger warehouse space has allowed the business to expand and better meet the demands of the alternative energy market. “Our crew is made of experienced, highly-passionate craftsmen. We invest in our people,” said John Fanselow, senior project developer. Fanselow notes that Third Sun Solar has eliminated nearly 8,750 tons of CO₂ per year from the atmosphere with all of their renewable projects. In addition, many necessary products of the business, including racking equipment and electronic micro-parts,
have been sourced from other companies in Ohio such as Ecolibrium Solar and Flex Rack. The firm takes pride in operating from a location that deeply connects it with the local community, and the Greenfields are committed to growing their business in the Athens area.

In addition to real estate options, Geoff and Michelle Greenfield have already begun to consider new lines of business in order to build upon the success of Third Sun Solar. Michelle aims to find more time to focus on and develop these ideas, but the growing installation market keeps the company busy as they foster this ideal community resource in an ever-expanding alternative energy market. This experience presents numerous opportunities that other local entrepreneurs can also use to establish and grow similar businesses.

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