

INNOVATION VALLEY (ivalley.org)

Hot renewable energy market is brewing in The Valley

John Michitson
VALLEY PATRIOT COLUMNIST

Former Army Captain Daniel Leary is a lifelong North Andover resident who was deployed to Kuwait as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom – and was honored last year as a Valley Patriot of the Month.

Now as President for a startup Renewable Energy firm he is fighting to make the Merrimack Valley a global leader again

By John Michitson and Seth Itzkan

Dan Leary started what is now Nexamp, Inc. in North Andover, MA in a garage with co-founder Will Thompson, also an OIF Veteran (Army CPT.) and four other Veterans after completing an MBA program at UMASS/Amherst. In graduate school, he wrote a business plan on clean energy and solar power, and tapped into the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's new program that offered rebates to install solar panels.

The company's initial focus was on solar panel installation in both residential and commercial facilities, including Osgood Landing which is the largest privately owned solar panel array in the state. It has since extended its capabilities to include a wide array of renewable energy technologies such as wind turbines.

More strikingly, Nexamp has transformed into an energy management services company after hooking up with a group of investors that brought capital and management expertise to the partnership. They now will establish an energy use and carbon emissions baseline for their customers starting with a comprehensive energy audit to identify all potentially cost-effective energy efficiency measures. Next, they determine the most cost-effective combination of measures to meet the customer's energy needs. Finally, they engineer and implement the solutions.

Today, Nexamp provides 25 full-time jobs. However, that is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the value that Dan Leary and his team bring to the region. He is a young business leader with an open mind about competition and what it means for the region. He proudly stated "Some of the top few solar



PHOTO: COURTESY INNOVATION VALLEY

Nexamp crew after the installation of the first PanelClaw Beta Site on top of Osgood Landing (source: Nexamp)

installers in the State are in the Merrimack Valley."

In our July column, we featured another solar installer, All-Pro Solar from Haverhill. Mr. Leary referred to All-Pro as a competitor but was quick to point out that direct competition is good for the region and the industry. It is leading to more efficient engineering and installation processes and more volume which creates economies of scale and ultimately lowers the price for commercial, residential and government customers. The value proposition for renewable energy is strengthening for all three market sectors and the Valley is a driver.

The days of major billion dollar corporations controlling huge markets, such as Microsoft in the PC software market, are coming to an end. Today, a small company such as Nexamp, with an innovative management team and forward looking business strategy, can be the catalyst for a regional eco-system in emerging technology markets, such as Renewable Energy.

For example, Mr. Leary came up with the concept of the Polar Bear solar panel mounting system, and then spun off a new business, PanelClaw, Inc., also in North Andover, to develop it. Costa Nicolaou is the President of PanelClaw. Mr. Leary astutely identified a major deficiency in solar mounting systems in the industry and filled

the gap with an innovative design that reduces the component count and installation time. According to Mr. Leary, "There are over a thousand Polar Bear mounting systems in beta sites in the Merrimack Valley. PanelClaw has signed a multi-year distribution agreement with the second largest solar distributor, groSolar, Inc."

The ripple effect from Nexamp does not stop there. PanelClaw needed a manufacturing partner to produce the mounting systems. They partnered with Olympic Engineering in Haverhill's Ward Hill Business Park, which is metal machine shop, to extend the regional impact.

What kind of mindset was needed for a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom to quickly become a player in the emerging Renewable Energy market and a catalyst for economic development in the Merrimack Valley? Mr. Leary's golden rule: "I can accept the answer "no" from physics, but not from an organization."

What It All Means

In the past several months, we have written about several companies in the Renewable Energy Sector that are located in our region. Together, they are forming an emerging eco-system of competitors, partners and spin-offs that are seeking to reach critical mass to become an economic development engine for the region.

Our Recommendations

One of the important recent events has been the Merrimack Valley's Planning Commissions' Economic Vision process. This vision is provided to the state and used as a basis for state investments in the region. The vision calls for the region to provide "an environment of innovation" that will encourage start-ups. It also calls for a "regional branding program" that would "reinforce the image of the Merrimack Valley as a cluster for technology investment". Specific action items identified are: 1) Increase coordination between economic and community development groups, 2) Expand the "Means Business" website, and 3) Explore best practices from around the country on regional branding efforts and interagency cooperation. To all of these we say, Hurrah!

We believe a regionally branding campaign should be initiated now, such as the Genetown branding campaign for Boston and surrounding area, embarked upon by The Massachusetts Biotechnology Council and

Biospace.com. The Genetown campaign, first initiated in 1993, is a collaborative branding effort to promote the regional biotech industries and investment opportunities. The campaign is part of a larger effort organized by Biospace.com to help brand "Hotbed" regions in the U.S. and Canada where biotech industries are strong. Other Hotbed regions include Biotech Bay, centered in San Francisco; BioCapital, centered in Washington D.C.; and BioForest, that includes Seattle and Southwest Canada. As explained on the Biospace website: "As regions compete for resources, these marketing and branding campaigns help to attract capital, talent and other resources to specific geographic areas".

"Innovation Valley," or alternative, could be our signature brand, analogous to "Genetown," and each of the Merrimack Valley's economic development clusters, such as Renewable Energy, could be branded as a "Hotbed." We have already developed a web site at our cost, www.ivalley.org, for stakeholder collaboration and branding across the Merrimack Valley.

The way ahead: regional leaders are needed to step up.

The Renewable Energy Eco-System in the Merrimack Valley, Companies that we have covered: **Solectria Renewables** of Lawrence - designs and manufactures premium efficiency, high reliability power electronics and systems for renewable power generation; **Nexamp** of North Andover - installs solar panels and other renewable energy solutions and provides energy management services; **All-Pro Solar** of Haverhill - installs solar panels and other renewable energy solutions; **PanelClaw** of North Andover - designs the Polar Bear revolutionary flat roof photovoltaic mounting system; **Olympic Engineering** of Haverhill - manufactures the Polar Bear solar mounting system; **Powerhouse** of Lawrence - green and modular home builder that uses "healthy" materials. **Evergreen Solar**, Fort Devens - one of the largest solar panel manufacturers in the country. Their products are used across the Merrimack Valley. Some additional companies (courtesy of the Merrimack Valley Economic Development Council's web site): **Environmental Solar Systems** of Methuen – designs and manufactures a variety of solar-powered products for home use; **Ulvac Technologies** of Methuen - the North American headquarters of a Japanese company, Ulvac is a leading equipment supplier for solar cell manufacturing industry.



John Michitson was a Haverhill city councilor for 10 years; the last 2 as president. He is a manager and electrical engineer at the MITRE Corporation in Bedford, Mass. John and his wife, Heidi, are enjoying the childhood of their 7-year-old daughter and 9 year-old son. email: john@michitson.com



Seth Itzkan is president of Planet-TECH Associates, a consulting agency identifying innovations in economic development. Recently, Mr. Itzkan helped The Boston Foundation to conceptualize and implement its Hub of Innovations tool. You can email him at seth.itzkan@gmail.com

The Innovation Valley initiative seeks to help stimulate economic growth and quality-of-life enhancements in the Merrimack Valley. Every month we will report on innovative businesses, practices, and ideas that are helping to make Merrimack Valley the place to be. Look for our article in print media and online at www.ivalley.org.

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