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Opposite the Editorial Page

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Clear advantages to solar energy

The offshore oil drilling disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has left us with nightmarish visions of a gelatinous sludge fouling beaches, birds and fish.

Daily news videos of the disaster created a paralyzing feeling of helplessness, as we face yet another massive cleanup that will take years.

With that in mind, I have a question; when did you ever see a solar spill? That's right, never. And you never will.

Oil industry claims of a remarkable safety record notwithstanding, we are left with an unassailable fact; much like a terrorist attack it requires only one spill and the damage is done. The real safety record lies with alternative energy sources, solar, wind, geothermal. And while so much of our attention is focused on fossil fuel disasters, alternative energy development has been quietly proceeding to its current efficient, affordable state.

In addition to alternative energy advancements that can help limit the need for offshore drilling and lead to a much cleaner environment, there also are rebates, tax incentives and abatements available that make installation of alternative energy sources such as solar, very attractive. For instance, while a solar energy array can significantly add to the value of a home, it is exempt from a property tax increase in Connecticut.

Over several decades technological advancements have made solar power more reliable, efficient and even more cost effective than many fossil fuel sources. Solar technology has now progressed to the point where it also provides a good return on investment. How good depends upon one's selection of technology, equipment, site, utility rate and financing instruments.

With incentives and rebates available, and Connecticut utilities charging the second highest rates for electricity in the continental U.S. -- as much as 24 cents per kilowatt hour -- there is no better time to consider solar power for uses ranging from domestic hot water to an entire home's electrical needs. Solar power is even available for the most cost-effective heating of outdoor swimming pools, extending the swimming season and repaying the investment within two to four years.

The price of electricity increased 86 percent between 2000 and 2009 in Connecticut and this trend seems likely to continue. However, the installation of a full solar array can protect homeowners. Costs are easily determined, annual levels of sunshine are actually quite predictable and the solar industry now has standard power production guarantees.

Solar arrays not only are more attractive, they also are built to last, some still providing electricity, and even hot water, nearly a half-century later.

Most methods of making a home more energy-efficient -- insulation, weatherproofing, replacing light bulbs -- have quick paybacks. But some, like replacing windows, can take up to 25 years to repay the investment. Compare that to the five to eight years it takes to repay a \$4,000 to \$7,000 investment for solar hot water system, or three years to repay the cost of solar heating for a swimming pool. An investment in solar electricity for your home can be repaid in 10 to 15 years -- and savvy investors take more than just the 25-year, 80 percent power warranty into consideration. Those who flip homes or move often revel in increasing home value without increasing property tax and in improving their ability to sell their home, particularly in a less-than-robust housing market.

Although government incentive programs have had some unpredictable funding cycles, much has been learned. And while the Connecticut Legislature's passage of an energy bill was vetoed by Gov. Rell -- despite her support of the solar provisions -- a new bill will surely be submitted in the next legislative session. It deserves strong support. With the U.S. solar market experiencing annual growth of 30 to 35 percent for the past decade, and a projected 40 percent for every year of the coming decade, it would be economically foolish to abandon the Connecticut solar industry and miss out on the savings afforded by increasing energy efficiency.

While our federal government and some less forward-thinking states have been outpaced by foreign governments around the world in their support for alternative energy development, clean technologies have been steadily advancing through the efforts of state governments and private enterprise alike. The future is no longer a far-off dream, it is here and it is providing us with a clean, dependable, affordable and deeply satisfying solution to our energy needs.

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