

**Businessman's fantasy may change vacant buildings into solar/water powered multi-purpose venue Boxboard property owner envisions sustainable energy technology center.**

By Taitia Shelow

CHATHAM — When Jody Rael hops in his electric golf cart and drives among the hulking shells of the old Columbia Boxboard buildings on Route 295, he doesn't see dust, dirt, leaking roofs and rusted equipment.

Instead, he sees a pub and restaurant in a three-story building previously used for electric work and storage. In back of the building, a flat concrete slab with a fence around it looks like an outdoor patio with a waterfall view. To Rael, a giant blue wheel that used to churn water is a performance stage in the making.

An inside gutter running the length of one of the buildings, the spot where a paper-making machine once stood, is simply a void that needs to be filled so it can become a staging area where artists demonstrate welding, glassblowing and blacksmithing. An empty warehouse next door would be perfect for a hotel/inn, and a former office building already has divided space ideal for classrooms.

"The space here is unbelievable," Rael said.

Rael, a Chatham resident, bought the former Columbia Boxboard property in 1997. He operates his business, Kling Magnetics, from one of the buildings, and rents space to Custom Overhead Doors, The Splat Factory and David Romanoff. But there's more than 100,000 square feet of space, much of it connected, and 200 acres of property that Rael had no idea what to do with - until recently.

The former paper mill was built in the 19th century and ceased operations in 1994. The buildings have required a lot of maintenance to keep them from deteriorating further, and Rael had been doing what he could to fix things room by room using the rent he collected. Then one day he had a vision, or fantasy as he calls it, to create an art and technology center demonstrating sustainable energy.

Solaqua Power and Art would harness the power of both sun and water, hence the name. Rael has owned a solar powered public address system since the 1970s, and the idea of harnessing water power seemed natural since the systems still exist from the paper mill.

"It sort of just became (the art center), and the idea of renewable energy came afterward," Rael said. "That's how we want to run this place; on sun and water."

Solaqua would provide desirable, affordable business "incubator" space for "fire" arts like glassblowing. The idea is to use an array of solar panels and hydropower from the Stonykill Creek's pre-existing dams to generate electricity.

The electricity will be used to separate the hydrogen from the oxygen in H<sub>2</sub>O, or water, and the hydrogen used to power furnaces, kilns and blacksmith forges. By separating the hydrogen and oxygen in this manner, called electrolysis, the only byproduct is oxygen. Traditional means of separating hydrogen for use in cars and home heating, for example, produce carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide, both greenhouse gases.

"This is real science that exists," Rael said. Scientists are even working on solar cells that make hydrogen directly from the sun, like plants do naturally, he added.

Education will be a key part of the project, Rael said. Solaqua itself can be used to educate people about renewable energy. He'd like to see apprentice programs in the fire

arts through area BOCES, school groups visiting on field trips, and adults taking a blacksmithing class for a few days while they stay in the hotel. Rael also would like to see a high school class do a video project on the history of Columbia Boxboard before the history is lost to renovations.

“We want to have a big educational component there,” Rael said. He envisions a troubled youth from nearby Berkshire Farm Center in an apprenticeship, pulling a red-hot piece of metal from a forge and banging on it as a way to relieve anger and frustrations. “That’s my fantasy.”

Rael knows he won’t be able to realize his vision alone. He’s already talked to local artists and arts organizations like the Columbia County Council on the Arts and the Columbia-Berkshire Craft Guild. Solaqua has been incorporated, and has partnered with Art Omi in Ghent. Solaqua sponsored a sculpture in Art Omi’s outdoor sculpture park and is supplying solar powered music for events. Solaqua also will develop exhibits for the Children’s Museum of Science and Technology at the RPI Industrial Park in Troy. The company has begun selling and installing solar energy panels to local residents, too. “We’ve been talking to everybody we can find,” Rael said.

Rael has met with the town of Chatham’s comprehensive plan committee. That group of volunteers is in the process of revising the town’s vision for the future. “It was amazing how well we meshed with their preliminary ideas,” he said.

Finding funding for such a large project is another big undertaking. “It’s just having enough time, energy and capital to make it happen,” he said.

Rael contacted a non-profit organization called Artspace to try and interest them in the project. The Minneapolis, Minn.- based organization has been developing affordable living and working artists’ spaces for 25 years. Their work can be found in their home state and across the United States, in places like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. Recently, Artspace was awarded \$11 million from New York state to develop a project in Buffalo.

Artspace has agreed to explore the Solaqua project and will visit Chatham to hold a public meeting. The organization will meet with local art groups, business leaders, financial backers and politicians prior to meeting with the public, Rael said. The fact that Artspace is willing to look at the project is a good sign, he added, as it gets many requests and can’t consider them all.

The man at Artspace with whom Rael’s been working has been positive so far, Rael said. “He gets me all jazzed up about my own project.”

Rael’s vision is much like that of artist Dahl Tayler, who visited the Columbia Boxboard property and drew some renderings of what Solaqua Power and Art might look like.

Upon seeing a rusted old tank on the side of a building, Tayler whipped up a drawing in which the tank is turned into a work of art - a sculpture. Hence, a potential \$25,000 cleanup became part of the vision.

It was a perfect example of “How do you turn something that was an eyesore into something you can look at?” Rael said.

**PULLOUT:** There will be a public meeting Wednesday, Oct. 26, at 7 p.m. at the Chatham High School auditorium about Solaqua, a proposed art and technology center in Chatham. The meeting with representatives from Artspace, a non-profit group from Minnesota that finds funding for art-related projects, will be to discuss the feasibility of the project and

ascertain if there is public support for it. Artspace's Web site is [www.artspaceusa.org](http://www.artspaceusa.org) and Solaqua's is [www.solaqua.org](http://www.solaqua.org). Solaqua's phone number is (518) 392-8171.