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Solar panels to light up HarvesTime

Chris Dallas sits in a hidden corner office inside **HarvesTime Foods**, located just above the produce section, peeking out at the fresh Roma tomatoes and avocadoes (a steal-of-the day at three for \$1.98). Sitting here, Dallas, who's a partner along with his three brothers in the beloved neighborhood store (2632 W. Lawrence Ave.), tries to view the store through the eyes of his customers, taking into account the homemade hummus and guacamole, an extensive meat and deli counter and a fiesta of brightly colored piñatas.

But some days, the co-owner is more preoccupied with the electricity it takes to refrigerate and light the 20,000-square-foot grocery store.

"Grocery stores are gluttons," Dallas says.

As he explains that he's doing what he can to temper that gluttony, an earthquake-like rumble comes from the roof, as if on cue. It's from the construction workers who are toiling above, installing the last patches of a large awning of solar panels.

The solar panel awning is scheduled to be finished before the week of Nov. 21, but its functioning will depend on weather. When it's finished, Dallas says that when it's sunny outside, the awning should soak in enough rays to power the store's lights for the entire day; the rest of the necessary electricity will still be delivered the old-fashioned way — from the power company.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), solar power accounts for less than 1 percent of energy in the United States. Dallas sees it as his duty, as a good neighbor and businessman, to make the right choices for now as well as the future.

"I've gotten green over the years," says Dallas. "I've learned to appreciate nature."

Dallas spends a lot of time outdoors. Whether he's cycling along country roads, walking through a forest preserve or swimming in Lake Michigan, he tires of seeing trash buried in the beauty of the nature.

"It's pathetic to say that I'm going to leave my kids the garbage to pick up," he says.

Since HarvesTime opened in 1995, a sister store to Edgewater Produce in Andersonville, Dallas and his brothers have made



Panels are just one addition to greenification of beloved neighborhood grocery store

small changes along the way to improve its sustainability, including placing an emphasis on recycling, replacing lights

with energy-efficient bulbs, carving skylights into the store to provide natural lighting and replacing single-pane windows with double panes for better insulation. Still, he knew he could do more.

The solar panel idea evolved when he decided to replace an old awning, which had been shredded by the elements. His initial vision: A beautiful metallic covering that would shade the outer length of the store — which nearly doubled in size in 2005 — and bear the HarvesTime Foods name.

After getting an astronomical quote (Dallas says it was the same price he originally paid for the HarvesTime building) for the metal awning, his plans changed. He decided if he was going to be spending that much green he might as well do something, well, green. So Dallas began looking into alternative energy.

He says he was pleasantly surprised by the quote he received from Chicago-based Solar Services on an awning of solar panels.

"It was on the outer reach of affordability," he says. "It was less than the sheet metal awning that I was contemplating a year before."

Plus, the company told him that through energy savings, the solar panels ought to pay for themselves within 10 years.

And because it's green energy, he's receiving assistance from the state of Illinois' Solar and Wind Energy Rebate Program, which provides a rebate of 30 percent of the project's cost (capping off at \$30,000) and he'll also receive federal tax credit. Rebates aside, it's still an expensive endeavor. But to Dallas, it's well worth it.

"For me it's a pain in the pocket to put up solar panels. But at least I will produce part of my electricity not having to worry that I have to burn off nuclear energy or coal," he says. "We can say we've done something because it's good."