

# CHAMPIONS

## FOR OUR COMMON FUTURE

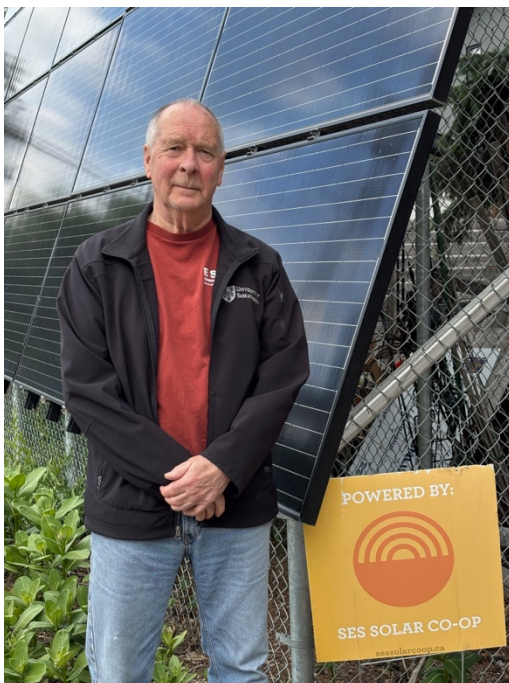
*Ordinary people taking extraordinary action*

### SOLAR ENERGY: IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

In the movie “*Field of Dreams*,” the refrain “If you build it, they will come,” compels the creation of a supernatural baseball diamond. In the real world, it reminds us that sometimes if we create something that speaks to people’s higher aspirations, they support it. The SES Solar Co-operative is an example of this. What started as a dream has become one of the province’s most successful developers of solar projects.

In 2014 Affinity Credit Union hosted a Business for Good Social Venture Challenge which invited non-profits to submit their business ideas. The Entrepreneurial Committee of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society (SES) had previously discussed the idea of a renewable energy co-operative but had not moved forward on it. Affinity’s competition provided the perfect opportunity to develop a plan for the co-operative and submit it to the competition.

One member of this group, Peter Prebble, had visited community-based wind and solar projects in Germany and was impressed by them. Currently, there are over 1,700 community energy projects across Germany, with around 80% dedicated to solar power. Many are co-operatives with members pooling funds to develop local energy systems. The SES group recognized that the co-operative model allows people to get involved in the transition to cleaner energy even if they can’t afford solar or install it on their home.



Solar Co-op President, Rod Johnson

Once submitted, the proposal went through multi-stage judging, which included evaluation by credit union employees and public voting. To everyone’s delight, the proposal won the challenge and \$50,000, which provided seed capital for the venture. Almost immediately, 49 people signed up for shares.

The dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly on incorporation, marketing, selling shares, finances and a website, not to mention finding an interested partner and procuring equipment and installation. Once incorporated, the SES relinquished ownership, and the Solar Co-operative became its own separate entity. Finally, at the end of June 2016, 90 solar panels on top of a building owned by Saskatoon’s Shift Development started producing 27.5 kW of electricity which feeds into the electrical. Since then, a lot has changed. Seven more installations have been completed, several in the Saskatoon Light and Power district, which improves the economics. Unlike SaskPower, Saskatoon Light and Power pays the retail rate for electricity fed into the grid.

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The co-operative now has more than 289 Class A memberships, has repaid a \$100,000 loan and has paid out two Class B preferred share dividends to members. Another is slated for 2025. Most significantly, the most recent installations are much larger. An installation at CNH Industrial, which manufactures farm equipment, includes close to 1,000 panels and provides about 12% of the total on-site electricity and reduces CNH's carbon footprint. The project is a "behind the meter" installation, so electricity produced is used on site. It is the largest urban solar array in Saskatchewan.

Getting the SES Solar Co-operative up and running was hard work, and it was risky. But its achievements show that the time was right for the concept and that it provides a model for other groups. Many people recognize the problems associated with our reliance on fossil fuels to generate electricity and want to be part of the solution, but doing this as an individual is difficult. Pooling funds allows participation by people who can't afford the cost of solar or whose homes aren't suitable for solar. Saskatchewan is the land of co-operatives, and the SES Solar Co-operative has shown how the co-operative model continues to pave the way for resilient communities and a sustainable future

*This column is a collaborative project of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society and the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development – RCE Saskatchewan.*



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**Saskatchewan Environmental Society** is a non-profit, registered charity that is committed to supporting sustainable living and sustainable resource use in Saskatchewan. We work with, and on behalf of, communities, organizations, businesses, and policy makers to encourage informed decision-making that moves us towards sustainability. SES's current action



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