

## **Laura Hammonds**

This interview is being done to facilitate the inside industry knowledge needed for the implications paper. By speaking with an industry insider, I stand to gain further understanding on how tax credits and incentives, other energy sources, and market forces impact the direction they are choosing to take the industry.

Dave Strenski is a local Ypsilanti resident and an installer of solar panels in Ypsilanti, Michigan. He has degrees in Surveying, Civil and Mechanical Engineering from Michigan Tech and currently works as an applications analyst for Cray Inc. He began the journey of Solar Ypsi in 2005 and has since completed numerous projects. The more notable of which involve installing panels on the Ypsilanti Food Cooperation and Ypsilanti City Hall. Mr. Strenski has also done a Ted talk on solar power <sup>(1)(3)</sup>.

I chose Dave Strenski because of the positive impact he's had on our town moving forward into solar power. Ypsilanti, while housing a four year university and a community college, isn't viewed in a very positive light in general. Solar Ypsi has brought positive attention and positive climate change to a town that otherwise would be unlikely to have a solar power presence.

My goal coming into this interview was to have a better understanding of the scale of what Solar Ypsi has done and how responsive it is to the issues of declining tax incentives and increasing natural gas consumption. This organization is still relatively small and I was intrigued by what kind of impact outside market forces would have on the decisions they make.

The following are the answers I received from Mr. Strenski in reply to the e-mail I sent him requesting an interview. I listed the questions in my first e-mail.

“1) The Federal renewable energy tax credit does not expire until December of 2016, so we have another 2 years to build the demand for solar power and hopefully drop its price further through economics of scale. The natural gas boom is a bit more troubling since it is a competitor to solar/wind and the prices are coming down or at least not raising as there were for coal. I'm hopeful that solar/wind can partner with gas and make a reliable energy source, using renewable sources as the bulk of the power and gas to dynamically pick up the slack when the sun sets or the wind drops.

[http://www.dsireusa.org/incentives/incentive.cfm?Incentive\\_Code=US37F](http://www.dsireusa.org/incentives/incentive.cfm?Incentive_Code=US37F)

<http://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy13osti/56324.pdf>

You still can't beat roof top solar for generation near its demand. Roof top solar has zero transmission losses. Gas power plants will still have to generate the power far away from where it's needed and lose about 6% of the power just in transmission.

<http://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.cfm?id=105&t=3>

2) From a local perspective, larger (~MW) projects are harder to do. DTE Energy owns the power grid, so any renewable energy project needs to play within their rules if they want to connect to the power grid. I have thought about "Community Solar" where people would buy shares in a large solar farm. The only way I see that happening is if the "Community Solar" project starts their own utility company. I don't even want to think about all the rules and regulations needed to start your own power company. DTE did have a RFP for solar farms to be located within communities. These would be owned and operated by DTE themselves. We applied and won phase 1 of the RFP, but the project has languished and I'm not sure it will happen.

<http://solar.ypsi.com/blog/2012/12/solar-farm-might-be-coming-to-ypsilanti>

3) I tend to think globally and act locally. I'm focused on getting as many solar roofs in Ypsilanti as possible. The biggest impact I have noticed was the drop in price for solar panels when China started manufacturing solar panels on a very large scale. We can now get panels for under a dollar per watt. Coupled with the 30% federal tax credit, solar power in Michigan has a ROI of about 6 years and last 30 years. I see a 2 year window where we have to act fast and get as much solar installed before the price for panels rises and/or the tax credit expires. I'm currently looking for a large grant (~\$5m) to create a local city solar credit and make the ROI 1 year or less. That's the only way we'll get a huge increase in the demand for solar and hit our goal of a 1000 solar roofs.

[http://www.mlive.com/business/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2013/09/1000\\_residential\\_rooftops\\_iden.html](http://www.mlive.com/business/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2013/09/1000_residential_rooftops_iden.html)”<sup>(2)</sup>

I feel the interview went well. Mr. Strenski answered the questions with very thorough answers and showed a vast knowledge of the industry. Specifically the answer to the first question shows that renewable energy insiders can be flexible and work with other abundant power sources. Renewable energy doesn't have to be all or nothing.

Dave Strenski and Solar Ypsi graciously gave me their time and expertise in solar power to complete this assignment. I learned about one part of the renewable energy business in my town and I'm excited to have further interaction with both the company and Mr. Strenski.

Sources:

(1) Understanding Solar Power in Ypsilanti: Dave Strenski at TEDxEMU. (2013, May 7). Retrieved October 15, 2014.

(2) Hammonds, Laura, Ms. "Interview with Local Student about Solar Power." Message to Dave Strenski. 14 Oct. 2014. E-mail.

(3) Estep, Nik. "SolarYpsi | Ypsilanti, Michigan." *SolarYpsi / Ypsilanti, Michigan*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Oct. 2014.