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## County grant lets Monroe heat firehouse with solar energy

By *GENE RACZ*  
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Monroe Fire Commissioner Maurice Mahler and township firefighter Les Barta are thankful for the \$100,000 Middlesex County grant to help put solar panels on the new firehouse on Halsey Reed Road.

But they take particular satisfaction in knowing that students in their community will fully appreciate the energy-saving devices.

Middlesex County Freeholder James Polos is expected to present the check tonight to Monroe. The township will be the first in the county to have an emergency service building powered by the sun. The building will also house an EMS unit.

Mahler began applying for the grant through the Middlesex County Sustainable Economic Growth Improvement Fund in February, and he solicited letters of support from politicians, the League of Women Voters of Monroe and students at the Applegarth School — located three blocks from the old firehouse.

"The students happened to be learning about the environment at the time, they had watched Al Gore's documentary, and they sent some amazing letters," said Mahler. "When I read some of them before the council, it brought tears to your eyes seeing how concerned they were about the future of their environment.

"The most important thing is that the kids will be able to get on their computers and go to our Web sit, [www.station57.org](http://www.station57.org), and see how the solar panels system will be working," added Mahler. "So in the classroom, this can become an educational tool."

According to Mahler, Monroe has bonded for the \$1.565 million new facility which is expected to be completed by next summer. Ground breaking is slated for this fall.

The entire solar panel project will costs \$194,000 and Polos said he's seen township figures showing that the system could eliminate the use of 115,000 barrels of oil over a 30-year period. Monthly fuel bills, estimated at between \$1,300 and \$1,500 a month, could be reduced to zero.

"The partnerships between county and municipalities through our Middlesex County Showroom of Environmental Technology (MCSET) program and through the sustainability grant fosters the implementation of green technology and sustainability," said Polos. "On the other end, the federal government really needs to step up to the plate and provide more funding to the state to provide to the counties so we can provide more up-front costs and better rebates."

Barta said the county grant will be instrumental in keeping the solar panel system "on the board" and he credits Mahler for finding the kids who care in the school down the block.

"They were some very astute and sincere letters from the middle-schoolers," Barta said.

"Eventually, we'll get a return on the project. Until then . . . we'll be energy efficient and working toward a cleaner environment."

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