**New Dawn’s new day for climate-friendly living**

*The Cape Breton social enterprise and leader in community self-reliance is on the path to a cleaner, more affordable energy future.*  
  
By Allison Lawlor, Climate Story Network

As the head of a non-profit social enterprise with a mission to support a culture of self-reliance in Cape Breton, backing a huge solar project to power an affordable-living community was daunting for Erika Shea, but still made perfect sense.

An array of 1,800 solar panels at a former military radar base in Sydney is now providing electricity to Pine Tree Park Estates, a community of 28 homes, a curling club, an office, and a 30-bed residential facility for adults with physical and intellectual disabilities, all of which are also located on the former base lands.

“Through the solar and the building retrofits we’ve been able to remove all fossil fuels from the property,” says Shea, President and CEO of New Dawn Enterprises, which owns and operates Pine Tree Park.

The 700-kilowatt solar project not only powers all the homes and buildings on the site and cuts greenhouse gas emissions, but, along with building retrofits, is reducing people’s energy costs by a third, says Shea. The clean energy generated at Pine Tree Park feeds electricity into Nova Scotia Power’s electricity grid when it’s sunny and draws from the grid when it’s not.

“We are putting energy onto the grid and then taking energy off the grid,” she says.

New Dawn worked closely with Cape Breton-based Verschuren Centre for Sustainability in Energy and the Environment on the $3.5-million project that also included building upgrades, including the installation of heat pumps and improvements to insulation and air sealing.

The solar project is just one of several energy efficiency initiatives New Dawn has recently undertaken to ensure that access to affordable housing in Cape Breton is also environmentally friendly. The non-profit social enterprise owns and manages a total — including Pine Tree Park — of 175 residential units and five commercial buildings, all of which are located in Sydney and Glace Bay.

“As an organization, we want to become net zero wholly,” says Shea.

To help get there, the New Dawn Centre in Sydney recently underwent a major retrofit to make it more energy efficient. The 38,000 square foot, three-story former high school, which houses New Dawn’s office, as well as 40 tenants, had 85 new windows installed last year, and its old boiler replaced by heat pumps. The retrofits dramatically cut energy costs. No longer do they spend $150,000 annually on oil to heat the building while remaining unable to regulate temperature.

“It was either cold or hot. People would have their windows open in February,” she says. “Through these upgrades, we’ve had an immense decrease in our impact on the climate.”

Upgrades to the building’s roof will soon begin, followed by a move to have the building powered by solar energy. With a grant provided through Nova Scotia’s Low Carbon Communities fund, a study will look at the feasibility of installing two new large arrays of solar panels on currently vacant land. Shea would like to see New Dawn in a position where it can charge low-income households (primarily in Sydney and Glace Bay) less for their power than they are currently paying.

“Our preference is for communities to own renewables and to own their own power,” she says.

Outside of providing affordable housing, New Dawn also leads food security initiatives. Its Meals on Wheels program provides 20,000 meals a year to mostly low-income households, connecting to local food production whenever possible.  
  
In May, New Dawn will become the first food enterprise in Cape Breton to use e-bikes as part of its food delivery fleet. A grant from the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage allowed them to purchase five e-bikes at a cost of $5,000 per bike. Some volunteers will soon be hopping on to deliver meals in and around Sydney.   
  
“It allows us, in a small way, to reduce our carbon footprint by using fewer vehicles,” she says.

The latest in a string of green initiatives, Shea knows that the e-bikes are getting New Dawn Enterprises one step closer to its goal of becoming a net zero organization.

-30-

*The Climate Story Network is an initiative of Climate Focus, a non-profit organization dedicated to covering stories about community-driven climate solutions.*