

Spire provides the gear for solar energy boom

By Andrea Gregory
Sun Correspondent

BEDFORD — Roger Little runs seven or eight miles every morning. On his lunch break he swims a mile. It's a ritual that has been going on for 25 years for Little, the 67-year-old founder and CEO of Spire Corp.

Little, who has competed in Hawaii's Iron Man Triathlon 10 times, might just be Mr. Energy himself. Even his business is all about energy. Spire is a leader in the solar energy industry, providing the equipment to produce solar panels and creating turnkey factories worldwide.

As implementing clean technologies become more of a priority, businesses such as Spire are expected to expand. It has already more than doubled the size of its work force in the last year, with close to 250 people now at its Patriots Park headquarters. Little is definitely excited about it.

"We doubled in 2007. We are going to double in 2008. And we are very optimistic about the future," he said. "We are eventually going to need more space."

In the last six months 100 new jobs were created and 50,000 square feet was added to the company's facilities. The growth is good news for the Bay State job market because even if the company does end up outgrowing its location, Little said he wants to stay in Massachusetts.

Spire is part of a bigger trend that Little calls "an industry explosion."

"Countries all over the world are trying to promote solar. Worldwide initiatives are really what's driving it," he said. "We are manufacturing like crazy."

Experts on clean energy agree. Chris Kealey, spokesman for Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, which administers the state's Renewable Energy Trust Fund, said the entire clean technology industry has rapidly advanced in the last few years.

Today there are 550 clean energy companies in Massachusetts, collectively accounting for 14,000 jobs. Kealey said this clean technology is a fast-growing industry and through job creation Massachusetts' economy will see the benefits. A greater awareness of environmental issues has shed new light on the industry, he said.

"That awareness extends to the environ-



Headquarters: 1 Patriots Park, Bedford

The business: Spire Corp. makes photovoltaic (solar cell) manufacturing equipment — including cell testers and assemblers — to produce modules that convert sunlight into electricity. The company's biomedical division makes medical devices (including hemodialysis catheters) and uses ion beam technology to re-surface valves and grafts to reduce friction and the risk of infection.

President and CEO: Roger Little

Employees: 250 locally

Status: Public

Revenues (2006): \$20.1 million

Profits (2006): N/A

Web site: www.spire.com

mental and the economic benefits," he said. "I believe clean energy is a sector that will continue to grow."

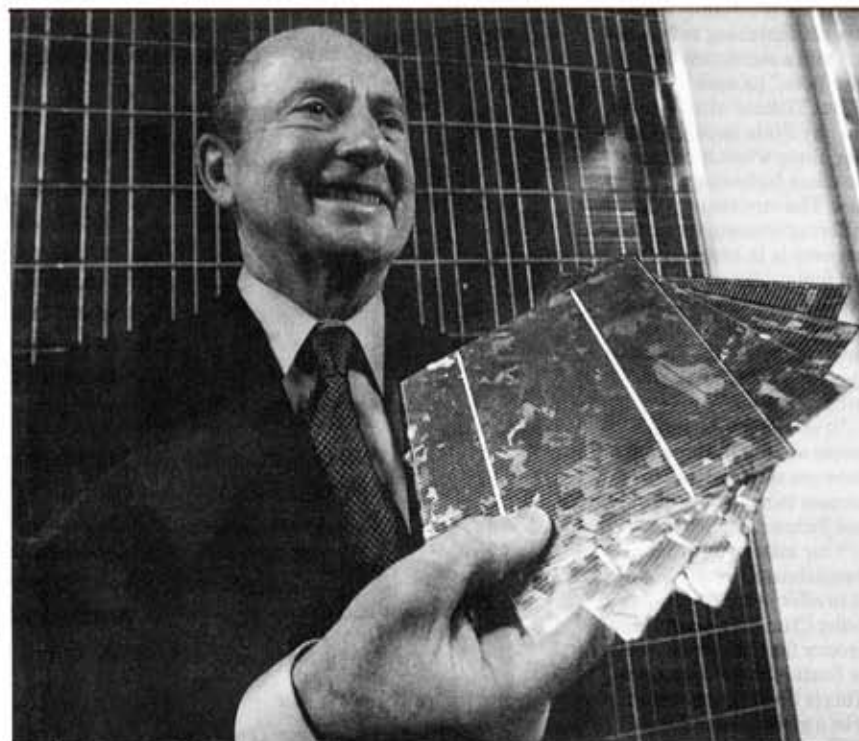
According to Kealey, government programs and initiatives are going to help the industry thrive. Among them are Gov. Deval Patrick's \$68 million plan to entice Massachusetts homeowners, businesses and organizations to go green with solar electricity. As a result, 27 megawatts of solar energy are expected to be created in the Bay State in the next four years.

Little said government incentives are a necessary factor in bringing clean technology into the mainstream. But he said America is way behind the curve compared to the steps other countries have already taken, he added.

"It all boils down to incentives by the government," he said. "The U.S. has not promoted solar energy the way that other countries have."

Little said 80 percent of Spire's business is international. He knows many countries are on a fast track to implement environmentally friendly changes, and he also knows solar can be a solution where other forms of electricity have failed.

Little is well traveled, seeing the effects of solar energy firsthand throughout the



Spire Corp. Chairman and CEO Roger Little holds up a group of solar panels made by Billerica-based Schott Solar. Schott uses Spire gear to make the panels. Spire has experienced such rapid growth that it has doubled the size of its work force and added 50,000 square feet to its manufacturing space in the past year.

SUN/TORY GERMAIN

world. In South Africa, he watched solar energy provide a school with electricity for the first time. The children would now be able to use a computer, have lights and be in a facility more suitable for learning. He said he remembers how the students' little faces seemed to light up just as much as the building now could.

However, solar energy is not just a solution to providing first-time electricity. The world is becoming more conscious of the benefits of clean technologies. Little said the solar industry is growing about 40 percent worldwide, and that a lot of people are looking to get into now. Since Spire manufactures the necessary equipment for others to enter the industry, its role is important — and business is booming.

"People are saying 'I want to be in the solar business,'" he said. "We are the guys

who make the equipment that makes the solar modules. We have built an international reputation for equipment."

However, fast growth has come at a price for the industry. Little said it created a shortage of silicon, the main ingredient for producing solar panels.

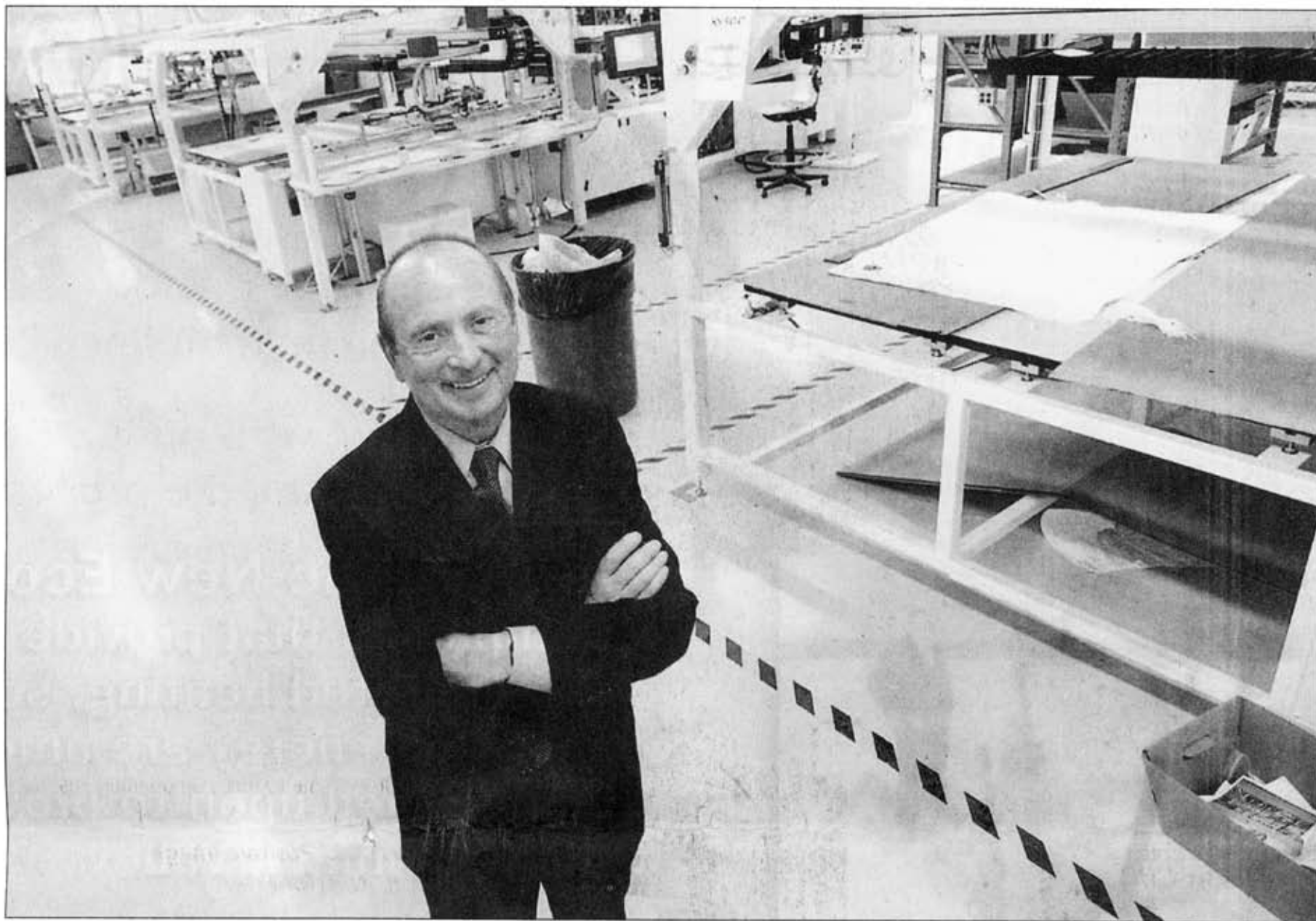
"The solar industry has grown so fast it ran out of silicon," he said. "We are waiting for the silicon dam to break."

He said the real industry growth will come in 2009 when silicon is expected to be more available.

"We think the best is yet to come," said Little.

According to Little, Spire's biggest challenge will be holding onto market share.

The company was formed in 1969. In addition to producing energy manufacturing equipment, Spire also makes biomedical devices and optoelectronic components.



Spire Corp. founder, chairman and CEO Roger Spire has hundreds of reasons to smile. Little, shown inside Spire's manufacturing floor in Bedford, reports that the company has doubled the size of its work force and added 50,000 square feet of space in response to increased demand for its products. Spire, which Little formed in 1968, manufactures the equipment that makes solar panels.