Hasell, 53, has a background in shipbuilding. "I'm on the Web. Payne found me. We talked and decided that we could make it work."

Kilbourn trademarked the term "unmanned ocean vehicle." With Solar Sailor's expertise and government contacts and Kilbourn's background in naval architecture and submarines, they co-authored a patent for a system combining "hybrid" solar and conventional means to power vessels, saving fuel and helping the environment.

He moved to King George in 2002, the year before his retirement from the Navy. Looking for something interesting to do, he started a small consulting firm. Through that, he met Robert Dane, chief executive officer of Solar Sailor, which was looking to expand its business. The company specializes in maritime freedom. Because it has an unlimited power supply and no crew, it could be on its own for months-indefinitely except for periodic maintenance and repairs.

"They're a conservative bunch. The moment you talk about unmanned, they say, 'How do you keep it from running into other people and follow the rules of the road?' My response is, 'Twenty-five years ago there was the same talk about unmanned aerial vehicles.'" What's new about UOV's design is that it has an unlimited power supply and no crew, it could be on its own for months-indefinitely except for periodic maintenance and repairs.

"The technology is starting to mature and unmanned systems are no longer taboo."

And that's significant, he says. "Once it's put in use and begins to take off, you start finding people in civil and commercial sectors leveraging the technology. It's no different from the space program," which led to products for the civilian sector. Kilbourn concedes that some in the tradition-bound maritime industry are skeptical of unmanned vessels.

Rigid wing sails have been around for years and aren't practical for light winds, but are practically indestructible compared to traditional sails.

Steering it will be another task: "The concept is a computer on the boat, and to link up commercial 1/8 piloting 3/8 systems, manipulate computer algorithms and teach the thing to sail," Kilbourn said.

He lined up investors and a solar-panel manufacturer, and teamed up with Virginia Tech to submit an application for the Navy grant.

Hasell, 53, has a background in shipbuilding. "I'm on the Web. Payne found me. We talked and decided that we could make it work."
The project began in June when the pair gutted a 1970s sailboat to create their own design. It could have been done solely by computer, but Kilbourn and Hasell wanted a more hands-on approach to actually build the prototype.

As Kilbourn put it, "to get our butts in it and see how it sails."

Hasell, an Australian who lives in Alexandria and commutes to Fairview Beach, is excited by the challenge. "I've been building 40- to 90-meter ships. This is totally different. It's more fiddly. It's the most interesting thing I've done. This is like, yeah!"


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