

SolarSmart energy program to roll out in April

Solar power consumers not happy with JEA decision to cut incentives

By Lilla Ross
Resident Community News

The new year marks a significant expansion in solar energy with JEA's SolarSmart program that will allow utility customers to get some or all of their electricity from solar.

With the planned 2018 retirement of the Northside coal-fired generating station, the public-owned utility will rely on natural gas and solar to generate up to 2,700 megawatts of electricity a day needed to power the city.

The SolarSmart program, which starts in April, will give customers the option of spending a little extra – .075 per kwh compared with .06988 per kwh – for the

solar option. That's about \$5 more for 1,000 kwh. JEA decided not to incentivize solar, choosing instead to charge actual costs.

This might be a good alternative for residents who can't use roof panels in tree-shaded San Marco and Riverside/Avondale neighborhoods. In lieu of installing solar panels on a roof, homeowners can buy solar power from a utility which operates solar farms.

JEA has been using solar since 1999 when it began installing solar panels at 25 locations, including schools, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and Jacksonville International Airport. It developed its first solar farm in Baldwin in 2009. Two privately-owned solar farms are on Old Plank Road and near JIA.

Last year the JEA board approved spending \$50 million to establish large-scale solar farms. Each farm could generate 50 megawatts of electricity, enough to power about 400 homes.

A developer will build the farms, each requiring 400 to 500 acres, on the Westside and sell the energy to JEA at a cost of about \$20 million a year. The farms are expected to go on-line by 2020.

Environment America's Shining Cities 2017 Study ranked Jacksonville 19th in the country for solar power production, generating about 24,300 megawatt-hours of electricity a year, enough to power 1,450 households. Jacksonville was the only Florida city to make the list.

JEA also began a net metering program in 2009, allowing solar panel owners to sell their excess energy to the utility, but the board recently voted to reduce how much it paid, cutting the rate from 11 cents per kwh to about 3 cents.

Advocates of solar panels are not happy about the cut.

"We haven't seen this in any other part of state," said Angela DeMonbreun, program director of Solar United Neighbors of

Florida. "Other big cities are encouraging more rooftop solar to reach renewable energy goals. In Central Florida, the local utility is incentivizing it and you see that in South Florida, too.

"But here in Jacksonville, JEA wants to be the provider. They are cutting out the little guys. And they want you to pay more for solar but the cost of solar is dramatically decreasing."

About 1,000 homes in Duval County have solar panels and Solar United was planning to increase that number by establishing a solar co-op like the one they launched recently in St. Johns County. The co-op would include up to 200 homeowners who could share the cost of installing panels on their homes.

DeMonbreun, a Riverside resident, was ready to sign up but she said since JEA changed its policies, the co-op is on hold. She is hoping JEA will revisit its decision and is encouraging solar advocates to contact the utility.

First District Court of Appeal hears appeal in The Roost case

By Kate A. Hallock
Resident Community News

Nearly a year after Duval County Circuit Court Judge Kevin Blazs rendered a decision to accept a motion to dismiss an appeal regarding a restaurant proposed in Riverside, the appeal was heard Dec. 14 in Tallahassee by the First District Court of Appeal.

the clock began on June 20, 2016, the postmark of the notice of City Council's May 24, 2016 approval, while the respondents believe the window began on the date of the approval of the ordinance.

During the arguments, Feiser said the City was aligning itself with the plaintiffs on the issue of when the countdown began for the appeal process.

"We're trying to afford the proper due process to those who are affected. A postmark is certain; there is not a date certainty to know when things are posted online and when the clock started running," he said. "The City could have picked any other point in time...but the City chose the best possible date for due process and to give those notice the appellate period has started."

"The ordinance says it is effective when it is signed by the council secretary and the council President. That date, in this case, is May 24," said Harden.

Even if the plaintiffs win, they may have to return to Tallahassee for the hearing of a second motion filed by the respondents, who cited a "lack of standing," that is, the plaintiffs would not suffer adverse effects