

## A sun-powered collective

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Anya Schoolman, co-founder of the Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative

At first blush, installing solar panels on your roof may seem like a great deal, both for your wallet and the environment. But as many homeowners have learned, residential solar power can be extraordinarily complicated. Professional installers give contradictory price estimates, government requirements are written in an impenetrable jargon, you have to deal with an electric utility that may not be too friendly to partially-off-the-grid-customers, and, of course, don't forget you'll want to navigate the myriad, confusing tax incentives (maybe) available to you.

The [Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative](#) <sup>[1]</sup> tries to make things a little easier for its members. The co-op, whose members live in Mt. Pleasant, a leafy neighborhood in northwest Washington, DC, got started with a group of neighbors who wanted to work together to bring solar power to their homes. Co-founder Anya Schoolman talks about how their model works, and how it's being replicated across the city.

### **Dowser: Could you tell me about the services that the co-op provides?**

Schoolman: We help people through the process of going solar: finding an installer, evaluating the installer, selecting an installer, understanding the tax incentives, the rebates from the city, things like that. We have forged a path to make that easier and more standardized for people.

What I always tell people is going solar is the beginning of the process, not the end of the process. So then we do advocacy. People have a lot of trouble with their meters and their billing with their utility.

### **What do people need from the co-op that they can't get on their own?**

You can certainly go solar on your own right now. We think that our members are much better educated in terms of what's the right technology, what's the right size, what's the right price to expect.

There are a lot of people who were promised rebates from the city [for the installation of solar panels] and they didn't get them. And to be one person that got messed over by the city government, you're pretty much on your own. But to be part of an organized group -- we've had this function all the way through.

**How do you coordinate so much voluntary effort?**

We use a lot of online tools, and there are a lot of volunteers and a couple pretty dedicated people. We have a listserv, and one of our members basically built our website for us and pays for it. We have two pro bono law firms, which makes a huge difference, especially on the regulatory stuff. And we have a lot of enthusiasm.

**What accounts for the enthusiasm?**

People really love the idea of doing something tangible and concrete. They're motivated by different things. Some of our members are really motivated by concern about climate change. And some of our members are motivated because they hate the utility or because they really want a feeling of self-reliance, or they want to cut down their energy bills. By going solar you've actually done something that you can see and feel and experience, and that's really empowering to people.

**The co-op has helped push solar-friendly legislation through DC's local government. How did you familiarize yourself with such complex policy, and what can policy novices do to be successful like you?**

There are great resources on this. In states where there is no solar going on right now, see if there are any solar installers anywhere in your state. They're the ones that have to make the numbers work, and they understand the financing -- not all of them, but that was our first source of real help. There's also a national organization called [Vote Solar](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, and they provide policy advice for passing local regulations that make solar possible. The other thing is this group I'm setting up, which is the Community Power Network, a national network of groups that help each other do this.

**What's the crux of your policy success?**

The real crux of this is having members who are real, active members of their community. Our members are head of the PTA, head of the neighborhood association. They are the kind of people who are very mainstream and who are very active in the community, and their local representative knows them.

**How do you deal with the technical side of all of this if you're a novice?**

I didn't know any of this stuff four years ago when we started. I knew none of it. But by starting with just the practical goal, like, I want to put solar on my church, then you start looking: Why can't I? Then you address the problems in order. And each time you have a new problem you just look around on the Internet, call people. You don't need to have a master plan before you start.

**If you went back to the co-op's founding, what do you wish you could have known?**

I think I would have thought through the communications mechanism more. That's been a steep learning curve. Information management, data management of coordinating these people.

**What's your greatest success so far?**

Two things. We've helped about 85 [households] go solar in Mount Pleasant, and that's really exciting because we now have this critical mass --- we have almost ten percent of the neighborhood on solar. My other greatest success is that people have looked at this and been so excited about it that we've been asked to help twelve other neighborhood co-ops start in DC. And so now we have a co-op in every ward in DC, and the co-ops are working together in a group called DC SUN. That's really exciting to me because it's showing that the idea is scalable and equitable.

*Interview has been edited and condensed.*

Photo: Gabe Rivin

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[1] Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative: <http://www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/>

[2] Vote Solar: <http://votesolar.org/>

