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MORGANTOWN / JUNE-JULY 2016 / COOPERATIVE SUN HARVEST

Cooperative Sun Harvest

Morgantown is hot for solar thanks to WV SUN.

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Alice and Kevin Meehan have wanted to go solar since they moved to Morgantown's South Hills neighborhood in 2001. The back of their house faces southeast and gets a lot of sun. They decided solar panels were too expensive when they first checked into installing them. But more recently, when they went to an information session in town in February 2015, they found the economics had changed.

"We're not wealthy people—we're middle class—but it turned out that this was very do-able for us," Alice says.

That information session was offered by WV SUN—that's short for West Virginia Solar United Networks. "We help people who want to go solar go solar," says WV SUN Program Director Karan Ireland. "We mainly do that by forming co-ops."

The solar co-op approach offers important advantages: It helps interested residents in a community get their questions answered together. And by creating economies of scale for installers—they can complete a lot of jobs in the same part of the state all at once—it makes for very competitive bidding, bringing significant cost savings to families and businesses.

The Meehans were one of 23 families that went solar with WV SUN in Morgantown in 2015. If you felt left out last year as solar panels went up on neighbors' homes around you, take heart: Another opportunity is heating up.

How it Works

After the February 2015 information meeting, the Meehans and a couple dozen other households signed up to have their homes evaluated. WV SUN took competitive bids from installers, and the group chose Mountain View Solar out of Berkeley Springs. By late summer, MTV Solar started to make home visits, design recommended



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installations, answer questions, and give estimates.

For the Meehans, MTW worked out what ultimately became a 25-panel, 6.25-kilowatt system that would cost about \$18,000. "They said it would take about seven years for our investment to pay for itself," Alice says—the power produced by the panels after that, through their 25-year-plus life, would be essentially free and would offset the cost of utility power kilowatt-hour-for-kilowatt-hour, even as utility rates rises. "That, we could live with," Alice says. "So we signed the contract." After the Meehans had their roof replaced in August 2015, which they needed to do anyway, the installation took a few days in September.

There are a couple ways to configure a solar setup, depending on the buyer's goals. Some households or businesses want better reliability—so when the utility power goes out during storms or system damage or overload, the lights stay on. That type of system



uses battery storage. Located here in town, the Meehans aren't concerned so much with reliability. What they chose, and what most households choose because they're looking for a hedge against rising utility electricity costs or a way to reduce their carbon footprint, is a grid-tied, "net-metered" system that feeds back into the utility grid when it produces more power than the household is using. The Meehans experienced that in the most satisfying way as soon as their system was turned on last September. "Initially it was really cool because the little wheel on the meter that goes around was spinning backwards," Alice says. Later, Mon Power installed a digital meter.

One of Kevin's favorite aspects of the installation, Alice says, is a sophisticated monitoring device called Solar Edge that provides all kinds of intuitive reporting—things like daily, monthly, and annual production, with charts. "He looks at it every day. He has an app on his phone," she says. She doesn't follow it as closely, but she enjoys the low utility bills. She sent *Morgantown* magazine a follow-up email a few days after our interview, saying, "Not to boast or anything, but our electric bill was \$5.25 this month." The system had produced 793 kilowatt-hours and they had used only 574, so they banked 219. For this unusually sunny March-April, the bill covered only a base rate and taxes.

Another 2015 co-op member, Cheryl Brown, lives with her partner south of town on Goshen Road. She said they were "pretty gung ho" after the spring information session. In October last year, they got one of the bigger installations of the group, with 32 panels. "I think we have 8 kilowatts installed," Cheryl says. "It was \$23,200." Like the Meehans, they got a net-metered installation and, in March-April, they, too, paid the minimum electric bill.

Cheryl has learned by watching the Solar Edge tracker that the panels make electricity even when it's raining. The tracker has also made her more acutely aware of her energy usage. "We have an electric clothes dryer—everything in this house is electric—and man does that suck power," she says. "When we turned the dryer on, it flipped the net meter to where we were sucking power from the grid, and when we shut it off it flipped it back. I think it's time for a clothes line."

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The panels on Cheryl’s house are an attention-getter. “Our panels face the road, so people drive in our driveway and knock on our door and say, ‘What can you tell us?’” she says. “I tell them go to WV SUN because you can save 25 percent, and that’s a lot when you’re talking over \$20,000. It was definitely important for us to do it that way.”



Alice was happy with the support from and the cost through WV SUN, too. “This is a little more affordable than it used to be,” she says, “and I think that people should consider it if they have a sunny roof and if they’re going to be in their house for a while.”

WV SUN’s 2015 Morgantown co-op installed 142 kilowatts of solar generating capacity. Combined with completed co-ops in Fayette County and in Wheeling, the organization has installed more than 300 kilowatts statewide. The organization is forming co-ops now in Kanawha, Monroe, and Tucker and Randolph counties, and planning to start a second Morgantown co-op in the fall.

Karan encourages people to visit the website, wvsun.org, and join the organization’s email list to be notified. Given tax credits and exponential drops in solar panel prices in recent years, “anyone who thinks solar is in the future, it’s important to know that it’s happening right now,” she says.

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