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## Less pay-per-ray: solar program kicks off in Bowie

*Bowie's solar cooperative purchasing program, among the largest in Maryland, begins installations this week*

By Derek Johnson Staff Writer

Bowie homeowners are seeing savings in seeking the sun. That's because a wave of homeowners will be installing solar panels after starting a cooperative purchasing program last year sponsored by the city and Maryland Sun, a renewable energy non profit organization.

Thus far 13 residents have signed contracts, 18 more are considering proposals and 12 have site visits scheduled, according to Maryland Sun program director Corey Ramsden. His organization has 27 similar co-ops running in Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia and West Virginia. At 157 committed members (including 140 within city limits), Ramsden said Bowie is the largest collective they have ever done in the state of Maryland, narrowly beating out the program set up with the University of Maryland, College Park, last year, which had 150 members.

"Solar is a very local phenomenon. Your neighbor sees it, it's a very natural thing to feed word of mouth," Ramsden said.

According to Bowie sustainability planner Kristin Larson, as of January, the city had 375 residents using solar panels to power their homes. The Bowie co-op is expected to add to those numbers, though it is unclear how many of the 140 will actually follow through and purchase the panels.

Participants are given a detailed proposal laying out the costs and feasibility for installing panels in their home before committing to a purchase. Larson said that she knew there was outsized interest for solar in the community when the city held an informational meeting about the co-op last year and had to move to a larger room to accommodate the number of interested residents.

"I didn't know how many sign ups we'd get. I knew people were very interested in renewable energy, especially solar because we'd received a lot of calls about it," Larson said. "It's more than being green, you're also going to save money. It's a good investment."

One of the most commonly asked questions that Larson and Ramsden say they hear around going solar is the cost savings: how much do you save and how long does it take to offset the hefty up front costs? While the price of solar panels depend on many factors, it is not uncommon for the cost of hardware, installation and other features to exceed \$20,000, they said. Discounts up front from the co-op and tax incentives like the Solar Investment Tax Credit from federal and state government shave thousands of dollars off the total cost. Still, it can typically take about 10 years to pay off the initial investment, according to The Energy Informative. Most solar panels come with 25 year warranties.

Annellen Moore lives on Manvel Lane in Bowie and has had solar panels on her roof for the past three years that produces about 95 percent of her home energy needs. Moore does not own or lease her panels, having opted instead to pay an upfront cost for 20 years worth of electricity at a fixed rate of \$7.50 per month. Moore said she is more than happy with her arrangement, but still believes that buying or leasing panels is a good long-term investment.

"Absolutely it's worth it, because one of our goals and something we hope others would share is the opportunity to participate in alternative energy sources," Said Moore.

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DEREK JOHNSON/GAZETTE  
 Bowie resident Carl Jones got solar panels last year and said he now spends about \$15 per month on energy costs.