

# Popularity of residential solar co-ops grows in Maryland

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For Amy Ginsberg, the financial incentives of going solar were hard to beat.

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The Pasadena woman received a trio of rebates, including \$2,500 off her property tax bill from Anne Arundel County, \$1,000 from the state and a 30 percent tax credit from the federal government.

But because Ginsberg is part of a solar co-op established through Retrofit Baltimore, there was another big benefit to putting up the panels this summer—it was easy.

“They took out all of the guesswork, and did all of the vetting,” Ginsberg said.

She’s one of a growing number of Maryland residents opting to join a solar co-op, which allows a group of homeowners to get together to buy solar energy in bulk at a discount, cutting their costs by about a third.

In central Maryland, there are at least nine such co-ops.

“Solar has really become the next big thing,” said Allen, who founded Retrofit Baltimore in 2011.

Retrofit Baltimore, part of the nonprofit Civic Works, works with homeowners on making their homes more environmentally friendly.

Allen said 150 homeowners from the Baltimore area joined Retrofit's first solar co-op, but there was enough of a demand that the nonprofit opened up a second request for proposals. This one is open to homeowners in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County and Howard County.

The Columbia Association in Howard County has around 20 homeowners who have begun the co-op process, said Jeremy Scharfenberg, the association's energy manager for construction and facilities management.

Many more have expressed interest, but because it's an old community, many properties are well-shaded by trees and don't qualify.

"The Columbia Association views it as a great thing," Scharfenberg said.

According to figures provided by the Community Power Network, which builds solar energy projects, a 9 kilowatt system would normally cost a homeowner around \$31,000; the same system, purchased through a co-op, would run around \$13,000.

Anya Schoolman, founder and executive director of the Community Power Network, told a group of prospective co-op participants at a community meeting last year that she got involved in the solar movement after her son watched the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and convinced his mother they needed to take action.

She told her son to talk to the rest of the neighborhood about his newfound passion for solar energy, and "two weeks later, we had 50 homes," she recalled.

Schoolman spent the next two years researching solar energy projects and the tax credits available for them, and advocating for legislation that would give homeowners incentives to go solar. In 2009, she helped 45 homes in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood in D.C. form a co-op, and Community Power Network was formed.

The network now spearheads solar projects in Maryland, D.C., Virginia and West Virginia.

The state's Renewable Portfolio Standard requires that 20 percent of Maryland's electricity come from renewable energy sources by 2022, including 2 percent from solar energy. The state ranks 14th nationally in installed solar capacity, according to MD SUN, the state's subsidiary of the Community Power Network.

One of the latest co-ops, Brother Sun Baltimore, represents homeowners from local congregations. The Brother Sun co-op is being supported in part by Interfaith Power and Light, which works with congregations across faiths to help them go green.

“We find that people in faith communities come to these communities to think about their choices and how they affect other people,” said Joelle Novey, director of the organization’s Maryland, D.C. and northern Virginia chapter. “People are so passionate about the idea of getting energy from the sun, and the wind. We call it energy from heaven.”

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