

News

/ News /

« DONALD BROWN

PATRICIA McPHERSON»

- News
- Public Records
- Opinion
- Sports
- High School Sports
- Life
- Sections
- Extras
- Customer Service
- Ads
- All Access E-Edition

Solar Co-Op Seeking Members

April 19, 2015

By SHELLEY HANSON - Staff Writer , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

[Save](#) | [Comments \(35\)](#) | [Post a comment](#) |

WHEELING - Over the past four years, Cameron resident Richard Niehaus has powered everything at his Big Cove Farm - barns, home, even cellphones - from solar panels as part of his effort to achieve what he terms sustainable agriculture.

Now, a group in Wheeling is looking to get others started on the path to solar system stardom.

The Wheeling Solar Co-op is looking for new members to help leverage buying power to purchase solar panels. Informational meetings are scheduled for 6:30 p.m. May 5 and noon May 6 at the First State Capitol, 1413 Eoff St., Wheeling.

Article Photos



Photo Provided

The co-op is being organized and sponsored by Wheeling Green Table and the Wheeling Academy of Law and Science, in conjunction with the non-profit group WV SUN.

By purchasing solar panels in bulk, the co-op is expected to help people save up to 25 percent on their solar systems, in addition to the 30-percent federal tax credit.

For Niehaus, the investment to go all solar cost \$66,000, which he funded through home equity loans. Over the past four years, that investment has saved him about \$18,000 in electricity costs. At that

EZToUse.com

I am looking for:

SEARCH

rate, his investment will be repaid in about 14 years.

Niehaus has been engaged in sustainable agriculture for almost 30 years, winning the West Virginia Conservation Farm of the Year in 2001 from the West Virginia Soil Conservation Agency. After winning the award, Niehaus said he felt the farm should broaden its conservation efforts, leading to the use of solar panels.

"We felt we should ... do our part in combating global climate change and promote the sustainability of mankind by beginning the transition from a fossil fuel-based farming and living operation to a more direct, sun-based one. After all, all farming activity involves the harnessing and the transformation of the sun's energy into plant and animal products used by other consumers for their individual energy needs. Hey, why not be more direct about it?" Niehaus said.

"By 2010 it made economic sense with the energy investment tax incentives both at the federal and state level to do so. With a little knowledge of the photovoltaic systems available, and an understanding of basic electricity, it became a no-brainer, with a payback period of 14 years and a functional lifespan of 30. After about a year working on the system, we became operational in May of 2011."

Niehaus, a licensed electrician, said he has 156, 200-watt panels running his operation. With some help from friends, he installed the system on his own.

"I consume about all of it with the barns and domestic use," he said. "I've really reduced my electric bill to zero and built up a credit. It's saved me (about) \$18,000 over four years."

Bill Howley, program director for WV SUN, said the cost of a residential solar system can run between \$13,000 and \$20,000 depending on the number of panels. Howley said his garage in Calhoun County, W.Va., has 15 solar panels that produced 4,000 kilowatts of power last year.

The Wheeling co-op already has about 20 members, but is looking for more, with a goal of 60 people.

"We now have people from several different places including one from Pennsylvania. We're going to proceed with them in the co-op until we choose the installer and see what the permitting differences are in other states like Pennsylvania," he said.

In addition to having a near zero electric bill, Howley said his system also contains a battery that has a week-long life even without additional sun. During power outages, his battery switches on.

"I always tell people to focus on reducing their electricity use before considering investing in solar panels," Howley said, adding people can first purchase high efficiency appliances, use efficient light bulbs and simply turn off their lights when not using them.

Howley said his organization on behalf of the co-op will send out requests for proposals to various solar panel companies sometime in June.

Howley said there are some national banks that offer loans for solar panel systems. And until June 30, businesses or farms can take advantage of the USDA Rural Energy for America Program.

© Copyright 2015 The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

[Save](#) | [Comments \(35\)](#) | [Post a comment](#) |

Recommend Be the first of your friends to recommend this.



[Subscribe to The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register](#)

The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

1500 Main St. , Wheeling, WV 26003 | 304-233-0100

© 2015. All rights reserved. | [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)