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Thursday, February 26, 2015



Solar co-ops grow in popularity

Solar technology slowing making its way to Virginia rooftops

By Kali Schumitz Staff Writer

While Virginia does not offer many of the tax incentives that have been making home solar energy systems more affordable and attractive in Maryland and other neighboring states, some local residents are taking a cooperative approach to reducing expenses.

Solar co-ops have been springing up throughout the state, following a successful model in Blacksburg, and are now bringing solar panels to rooftops around Fairfax County. "Compared to Maryland or North Carolina, we have very little

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incentives that give value to solar," said Aaron Sutch of VA SUN, a nonprofit that helps support and organize solar co-ops. "These solar co-ops are a great stopgap measure to make up for this lack of incentives."

The co-op approach brings together people in a small geographic area who are interested in solar, educates them about the technology, pre-screens roofs and facilitates a group bid for solar installation.

Purchasing through a co-op typically reduces costs by 20 to 30 percent, "It reduces a lot of the soft costs" for solar installers, Sutch said, which allows them to bid lower.

Last fall, a group of religious congregations, led by the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, Temple Rodef Shalom and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fairfax, formed the Northern Virginia Interfaith Solar Co-op, which was open to any local homeowner.

About 20 families will soon have home solar systems as a result of the interfaith co-op, Sutch said.

The co-op approach is "very stakeholder-driven" Sutch said. VA SUN helps co-op members determine the most important characteristics in a contractor and helps them through the bidding and selection process.

While the interfaith co-op is closed to new members, there is a new opportunity for residents in the City of Falls Church and the towns of Herndon and Vienna, which are all working with Solarize NOVA to bring more affordable solar to those jurisdictions. Solarize NOVA is a project of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission.

"Simply put, what Solarize does is that we take all the footwork out of solar for the homeowner or business owner," said Robert Lazaro Jr., director of regional energy planning for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission.

Similar to the co-op approach that VA SUN coordinates, Solarize NOVA saves costs for solar contractors by marketing and educating potential customers about solar technology and doing an initial assessment to determine whether a home is a good candidate for solar. Not all homes are good candidates due to the direction the home is facing, the age of the roof and the amount of shade on the roof.

In addition to the free solar assessment, Solarize NOVA also provides free home energy audits to those who sign up with the goal of helping people improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

The organization then vets potential contractors and pricing, saving the homeowner from having to solicit their own bids.

The contractors are all local, "so we're supporting local industry as well," Lazaro said.

Sutch said in Blacksburg, where about 60 people installed solar systems over the course of the year, the program generated about \$1 million in retail sales.

Solarize NOVA has a request for proposals out now for contractors that are interested in participating in the Falls Church, Herndon and Vienna programs and will have more information on pricing available in late March, Lazaro said.

Homeowners will be able to sign up between April and June.

The pilot project of Solarize NOVA in the town of Leesburg resulted in 15 new solar arrays, purchased at a savings of 15 to 20 percent, Lazaro said.

The regional commission hopes to offer Solarize NOVA to other areas in the future, he said.

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