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Sun power rising across West Virginia

By Andrew Brown



*West Virginia Public Broadcasting
courtesy photo*

The Linsly Institute building in Wheeling, which served as West Virginia's first capitol, had solar panels installed earlier this month. The historic building is one of a number of homes and businesses that have moved to

solar energy.

The number of West Virginia homeowners and businesses installing solar panels is increasing as solar co-ops continue to pop up in various regions of the state.

On Thursday, the newest solar group met in Buckhannon to gauge local residents' interest in collectively purchasing solar panels for homes and businesses in Upshur, Tucker and Randolph counties.

If the organizers get enough people on board — about 20 are needed — the group would make the fourth solar co-op to be formed in recent years.

While West Virginia still has far fewer solar installations than other states, renewable-energy advocates and residents who already have made the leap to solar believe interest in the technology is growing and will only become more prominent as existing co-ops become more successful.

“I have always been interested in renewable energy and solar panels,” said Cory Chase, a Tucker County resident who has led the effort to start the new co-op. “Through social media, I have learned about the co-ops in Morgantown, Wheeling and Charleston.”

Chase, a massage therapist and former ski instructor, said his main goal in installing solar panels on his property is to reduce the environmental impact of his energy usage.

“For me, it's an environmental end goal,” Chase said. “It's a moral and ethical choice for me.”

In its simplest form, a solar co-op is a group of people who join together to obtain a better deal on solar panels and installations.

“Basically, it's just bulk-purchase power,” said Karan Ireland, the program director for WV Sun, which has led co-op efforts throughout the state. “That is one of the most onerous parts of going solar, just trying to figure it all out.”

The co-ops in Charleston, Morgantown and Wheeling are all at different stages of development.

Dozens of participating residents are expected to meet in Charleston this week to review competing

bids for that group's solar installations. More than 23 Morgantown-area residents have already had panels installed and, to this point, residents in Wheeling have completed nine retrofits, including the installation of dozens of panels on the Linsly Institute building, the historic Wheeling structure that served as West Virginia's first state capitol.

"I wouldn't have predicted a few years ago that our state would have caught on to it," said Mary Ellen Cassidy, who owns the Linsly Institute building with her husband, an attorney that operates a law firm out of the building.

Cassidy said she believes that simply having solar panels in the community is changing some people's perspectives and understanding of the technology. She had several people come up to her and ask about the recently completed project.

"We have gotten great reactions. People are really amazed and surprised," Cassidy said. "Solar is not a visible entity here in the valley. You don't walk down the street or through neighborhoods and see solar panels."

Ireland said she wants to form six additional co-ops by the end of next year.

Continuing rate hikes for electricity play a role

Environmentally conscious individuals have shown an interest in residential solar for years, but advocates in West Virginia believe several factors are starting to attract a new group of people to solar, namely homeowners who base their decisions on their pocketbooks instead of their conscience.

With the price of solar panels trending down and electric rates in the state expected to continually increase in the coming years and decades, solar proponents believe more people are weighing the option of producing some of their own power.

"The type of households that we saw purchasing rooftop solar were pretty diverse," said Joey James, a staff scientist with Downstream Strategies who helped set up the co-op in Morgantown.

James said there were rural and urban homeowners, new parents and retirees, and people from both sides of the political spectrum who showed up to learn more about solar installations.

Cassidy said the same was true of the gatherings in Wheeling.

"That's the beauty of this. There are several people in our co-op that don't have any general concerns about climate change," she said. "They are really looking into it to see what it can do for their family and their budget."

Nearly every West Virginian is expected to see their power bills increase in the coming year. Whether they are signed up with American Electric Power or FirstEnergy, the average residential customer is expected to see their bills go from around \$100 per month to more than \$110.

"That is absolutely playing into it," Cassidy said. "At every meeting, somebody mentions the rate hikes."

Will solar tax credits come to an end?

However, as organizing efforts continue to take shape around the state, solar advocates are closely watching federal and state policy battles that could upset the cost calculations that have made solar more appealing.

Currently, residential solar users are able to benefit from a range of tax incentives, federal grants and market-driven benefit programs.

Residential customers with rooftop solar can receive a 30-percent tax credit from the federal government for new installations. Small businesses in rural communities can receive thousands of dollars in grants under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America Program. Every solar customer in West Virginia is paid by electric utilities for the excess power they produce. And anyone who installs solar can get paid for the technology by trading it as a renewable energy credit on the PJM Interconnection, which runs the regional energy grid for 13 states and the District of Columbia.

However, some of those advantages are being combated by electric utility companies and some lawmakers who say defeating alternative energy sources is key to reviving the struggling coal industry.

The 30-percent Residential Renewable Energy Tax Credit, which was started under President George W. Bush's administration, is set to end in December 2016, unless Congress reapproves it.

In West Virginia, the Public Service Commission has yet to decide if additional costs should be placed on solar under the state's net metering rules, which were the subject of a PSC task force required under a 2015 law passed by the state Legislature.

"It's obviously of concern, but the fact that people are going ahead at the rate they are is symbolic of how people feel about this," James said.

John Bird, one of the co-op members in the Morgantown area, said he couldn't understand why some people in the state were so opposed to the growth of residential solar.

"There are some utilities that have embraced this and seen it as a way to avoid building another power plant," said Bird, an electrical engineer. "But in this state that now has excess power, they really don't want people like me installing solar."

Still, as the price of electricity keeps going up, Bird said his investment becomes more and more attractive. He said his payback period might drop from 12 years down to nine or 10 years, depending on the price of electricity in the state.

'It is growing, and I believe it will grow exponentially'

Collin Williams, the vice president of Mountain View Solar, not only sees the solar market in West Virginia as a viable option for homeowners, but he also sees it as opportunity to grow jobs in the state.

"It is growing, and I believe it will grow exponentially," said Williams, who controls marketing and sales for the Morgan County company.

There are several factors playing into the growth in the industry, Williams said, including cost,

availability and public awareness. He just hopes that awareness drives employment in the state, too.

Williams said his company is proof that there can be good jobs created out of the increased need for solar installation and maintenance.

Mountain View Solar began in 2009, when owners Mike and Pete McKechnie transitioned their construction company, which was witnessing a downturn in the housing industry, into a renewable-energy provider, Williams said.

The company now has 20 employees who have found steady employment installing solar panels at places such as a for-profit university in Charles Town, the Morgan County Courthouse, a Department of Environmental Protection office in Charleston and the Hurricane Waste Water Treatment Plant. They also have contracted on projects for beer distributors, funeral homes and 10 houses managed by Habitat for Humanity.

Williams said he doesn't understand why local officials would pass laws and policy that would detract from these types of jobs. He added that he doesn't believe the acceptance of customer-generated solar should be a political sticking point.

"Our right to make our own energy," he said, "is a very conservative and libertarian view."

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