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Kanawha County solar group continues to grow

By Andrew Brown

Their numbers are small, but the group keeps on growing.

Half a dozen people from St. Albans, South Charleston and Charleston's West Side met Wednesday evening to learn more about residential solar panels and the ongoing effort to organize the Kanawha County Solar Co-op, a group of roughly 38 people who are considering solar installations at their homes.

The group of Kanawha County residents voted last week to hire AAT Solar, a company out of Cleveland, to construct the residential solar systems for the co-op members. But Karan Ireland, the program director for WV Sun, which has helped organize solar co-ops throughout the state, said they will continue to accept other people into the group until March 19, when they will finalize the construction contracts and begin installations.

Trish Hatfield, a resident from St. Albans who was at the meeting Wednesday, said she became interested in residential solar power after talking to her friends in Massachusetts who had installed rooftop solar panels and are now considering battery storage for their system.

"It's the way of the future," Hatfield said. "We have to do it."

The people who join the Kanawha County Solar Co-op by March will not be the first West Virginians to install panels. Co-ops in Fayetteville, Wheeling and Morgantown already have started installations in those cities. Another group is being formed in Tucker County and according to records from the PSC, there already are 108 American Electric Power and roughly 400 First Energy customers that have panels installed at their homes and business.

Those numbers are only expected to grow. According to planning documents from Appalachian Power, residential solar power could increase in the company's service territory by 5 percent every year.

If that happens, the company found that roughly 14 megawatts of capacity could be produced from the panels that are distributed throughout communities.

The Kanawha County residents who showed up at the meeting Wednesday in South Charleston were able to listen to the proposed solar installers and Ireland, who discussed the specifics of a solar co-op.

Mary Pat Peck, a resident from Charleston's West Side, said Wednesday was the second time she had attended a meeting on solar co-ops, and that she definitely is interested in installing panels in the future.

In its simplest form, a solar co-op is a group of interested business and homeowners who want to install solar panels and hope to get a better deal on the solar equipment and installations by purchasing the technology in bulk.

"When you get multiple people together and buy everything at once, you have a bunch" said Jamie Doyle, one of AAT Solar's partners who was at the meeting.

Once the group is able to select an installer, each member gets a personalized construction proposal that varies depending on how much energy they use, where the panels would be located and the suitability of their home.

Jeff Kalt, another partner with AAT Solar, said as the price of the 280 watt photo-voltaic panels has continued to drop in the past five years, people's attraction to the energy technology has continued to increase.

Since 2006 or 2008, they said the price of the standardized 60-cell solar panels has fallen to roughly \$280, and when the company buys larger quantities the shipping and other associated costs are reduced.

Doyle said that all of the panels that they install include a 25-year warranty, and that in most cases, the technology can be paid off through tax incentives, monthly electric bill savings and renewable energy credits within 8 to 10 years.

"That number shortens as the cost of electricity goes up though," Ireland said.

But she said the reasons why West Virginians choose to install solar panels is varied. Some want to save on electric bills. Some want to install batteries and be completely removed from the grid. And others are simply concerned with limiting their carbon footprint linked to their electric usage.

"I have always been interested in this," said Joan Fernandes, a longtime South Charleston resident who attended the meeting with her husband. "When I heard about this, I said, 'It's our chance to get more information on solar.'"

Fernandes said she likes the idea of neighbors coming together to save money on a beneficial investment. She plans to tell her neighbors about the opportunity to get involved.

"There's strength in numbers," she said.

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