

An Interview with Solar Activist Anya Schoolman



Anya Schoolman, solar activist, is founder and president of the Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative in Washington, D.C.

BY KATHERINE WROTH

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For a while, things were looking gloomy. The founders of Washington, D.C.'s Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative had their hearts in the right place; they even had their paperwork in the right place. But they hit snag after snag as they tried to fulfill the dream of converting their neighborhood to solar power: Contractors who didn't want to sell solar panels in bulk. Confusion over the role of the regional utility. And the inevitable red tape of local politics.

Eventually the group's persistence paid off, and this month they're celebrating their fiftieth neighborhood solar installation. Here's the story of how it all happened, as told by co-founder and president Anya Schoolman.

Q. Can you explain what the Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative is, and how and when it formed?

A. The Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative emerged from dinner table conversation I had with my son Walter, then 12, and his friend Diego. They had seen *An Inconvenient Truth* and they wanted to know, if the Earth was going to overheat in their lifetime, "Is, um, anybody, you know ... going to do anything about it?" The next question was, "Why don't we get solar power in our neighborhood?" So we decided we would try to do something. Our neighborhood consists mostly of row houses with flat roofs. We thought if we got enough neighbors together who wanted to adopt solar arrays, some solar contractor would offer us big discounts. We got the neighbors together and quickly learned it was going to be a lot more complicated than we originally thought. So we set out to educate ourselves about all aspects of solar and to share that knowledge with as many people as possible. That's where the "cooperative" concept really proved valuable.

Q. The cooperative is marking a pretty significant achievement this month: solar installations on 50 homes. What did it take to get to this point, and how will you celebrate?

A. We have been working hard for the last three years to get here. We had to sign up, recruit, and educate more than 200 households. We did energy conservation work such as energy audits and compact fluorescent light bulbs in the early years when we were still figuring out a pathway to go solar for our city. We completed roof inspections on more than 86 homes. We helped pass major legislation here in D.C. We worked with two top-quality pro bono law firms to "engage" our local government, our utility, our Public Service Commission, and others. Our lawyers and co-op members also helped us with economic, tax and legal analysis and helped us negotiate contracts for our members.

Q. Looking forward, what are your hopes for the cooperative over the next year? Five years? Ten?

A. The agenda for the next few years is pretty big. First of all, we hope to help support other co-ops to form all over D.C. At a minimum, we want a co-op in each of the eight wards of the city, so that each co-op will be able to engage and influence one member of our city council. We figure that will be a great basis for moving other legislation in the future. **We would also really like to develop a financing mechanism for residential solar so that it will be available to a much more**

economically diverse group of people.

Q. What are the pros of this cooperative model? What have proven to be unexpected challenges?

A. We have found the cooperative model to really work in terms of advocacy. The politicians have all heard from the local environmental groups and they don't pay too much attention. However, when they get a petition or emails from homeowners in their district, they take notice. The fact that we are organized, focused on practical outcomes, and pay taxes in their district makes a difference. We have also found the cooperative to be a great model to share information, skills, and expertise among neighbors. The people of D.C. are an amazing resource.

People would much rather get information about solar from a neighbor than from a salesman or contractor. Even though the solar installers are very knowledgeable, they obviously are pushing a particular product or approach.


Q. What do you say to those who think solar is unaffordable or unreliable?

A. I am not sure anyone says solar is unreliable, because if you are on a grid-tied system such as we are, there are no risks in terms of reliability. On days when you produce more energy than you use, you put your energy onto the grid and generate a credit on your electric bill. On days when you use more than you produce, you draw

from the grid just like you did before solar. Most of our homes are aiming to provide 1/3 to 1/2 of their electricity from solar. Solar is still expensive. There is no doubt about it. Especially residential solar where you need to find a custom solution for almost every roof, and each home needs its own meters and inverter. But citizens really want solar—and from my experience, this includes people of all economic and cultural backgrounds. It isn't something that only well-to-do environmentalists want. People of all backgrounds are concerned about climate change. People want the self-reliance—it is like getting a fixed mortgage on your house. It may cost more, but it is a type of security and you know it won't go up.

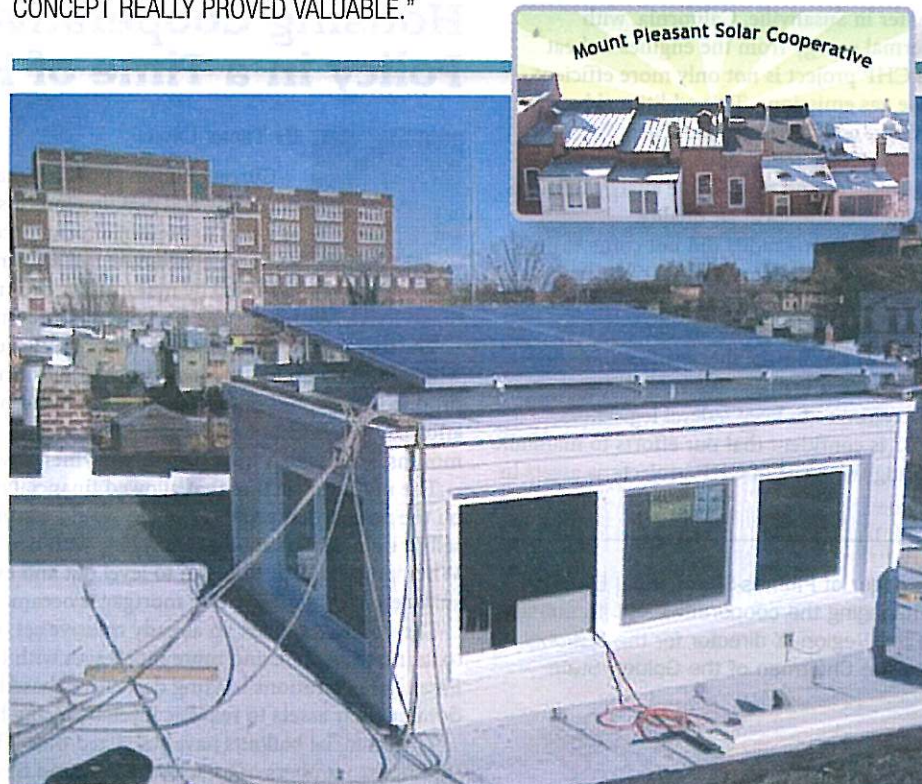
For now, residential solar needs subsidies, and people can organize to get them. It is getting easier each day, and the number of creative models and solutions emerging around the country is staggering. Suddenly, the federal tax credit is very, very attractive. It has gone from 30 percent capped at \$2,000 to 30 percent with no cap! Our D.C. rebate is currently funded at \$2 million a year. That is enough to fund nearly 200 houses a year at an average of around \$7,000 a house. The sale of our renewable energy credits will generate close to \$1,000 a year for most of our members. In addition to that we save about \$500 a year on our electric bills (at today's prices). So right now, for us, it adds up to making solar not only affordable but a very good investment.

Q. Do you think yours is a replicable model? What advice would you give people interested in starting a solar cooperative of their own?

A. I do think our model is replicable. We are interested in joining with sister co-ops anywhere in the country and creating a network. We are working actively to support new co-ops here in the D.C. area. I think I could spend a whole day giving advice to people who want to start their own co-op, and I am available to provide workshops for any group that wants to get started. A few ideas are: Get a strong core group to start, and include some kids in the core group. Buy an email management system. Be clear on what your goals are. Don't be afraid to get political and get down deep in arcane rules, regulations, and technical details. If you get stuck, ask for help—you will be surprised how many others want you to succeed. Don't take a path that won't work for others. For example, if given a choice, as we were, of getting a one-time grant to support your installations or creating a long-term program that will serve others who follow, always go for the long-term path. Ignore everyone who tells you it is too hard, too expensive, or any other excuse. Americans spend \$1 billion a year on anti-wrinkle cream and no one tries to tell them they are wasting their time and money. 

Katharine Wroth is a senior editor at Grist, an environmental news and commentary web site. Visit www.grist.org for more information.

"WE SET OUT TO EDUCATE OURSELVES ABOUT ALL ASPECTS OF SOLAR AND TO SHARE THAT KNOWLEDGE WITH AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE. THAT'S WHERE THE COOPERATIVE CONCEPT REALLY PROVED VALUABLE."



A solar panel installation on a much smaller roof belonging to a D.C. resident who installed solar panels on his own home in the U Street neighborhood.