



Solar Home Tour And Fair
Saturday, Oct. 16
Lutheran Church Of The Reformation
212 East Capitol St. NE
Fair--10 to 2 p.m.
Home Tours--noon to 4 p.m.
www.capitolhillenergycoop.org

Max and Jeff Johnson are shown on their solar roof. Photo: Jeff Johnson

Solar Power

Easy, Saves Money, Helps the Environment

By JEFF JOHNSON

Standing on the flat, hot, and shiny roof of my Capitol Hill row house, I can see a vision of a solar energy future. Spread before me are row after row of empty roofs, unobstructed by trees or buildings. As the sun blasts down, this block-long line of roofs looks ripe for solar panels.

That is what a small group of Hill residents thought a year-and-a-half ago when we began looking into how we could install photovoltaic solar panels on our roofs. We were among some 350 members of the Capitol Hill Energy Co-op, founded in 2008 to address energy and environmental issues, particularly climate change and green-

house gas emissions.

Our utility, Pepco, gets nearly half of its electricity by burning coal, and nationally, coal-fired utilities produce about one-third of the U.S.'s greenhouse gases. They are the largest single source of carbon dioxide emissions, the most abundant greenhouse gas. When you toss in environmental and health damage from coal mining, coal ash pits, and air pollution, it is clear now is time to move away from coal.

A little more than one month ago, the solar group's investigation into solar energy came to fruition for me when I had 12 photovoltaic panels installed on the roof of my house, about

a block from Stanton Park. The panels can generate 2.8 kilowatts of electricity, enough to cover about half of my Pepco electricity bill. The system cost \$20,000 and was installed in just two days. And most important, with a little luck, I can get all my money back in three years.

Solar Pioneering

When we began looking into solar, our group realized we didn't know exactly where to start. We were sort of solar pioneers.

We began searching for solar installers and found a dozen or so in the DC area. We pared the vendors down

to about eight, interviewed them, and chose four that seemed most willing and able to do the job. We offered to give them preference if they would give us a deal.

We did and they did.

I got bids from the installers and eventually selected the small company Solar Solutions to do the job. The installer stood in line and got the District building permits, cleared the project with the Historic Preservation Office, and helped me figure out how many panels I needed and how they should be attached to my roof.

I wanted to go simple and wound up selecting a design in which the

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platform that supports the solar panels rests on the "party" walls between my house and my neighbors. The supports are similar to a deck, and significant for our aged house, there is no weight on the roof.

Such "solar options" will be presented Oct. 16 at the Hill Co-op Solar Fair and Homes Tour, Lutheran Church of the Reformation, 212 E. Capitol St. NE, starting at 10 a.m.

Covering the Cost

Most important in all this discussion is the money. We have a modest house and wanted a modest bill.

Under a three-year-old U.S. law, residents can get a 30% federal tax rebate for the cost of a solar installation. So next year, I can get \$6,000 deducted from my federal tax bill. And through a recently passed District law, pushed by Council Member Mary Cheh and strongly supported by Capitol Hill's Tommy Wells, DC residents and businesses can obtain an upfront payment to ease the cost burden and to encourage solar installations. Through the District law, I received \$8,400 to help pay for my panels. The District has set aside \$2 million a year through 2012 for this program. It pays \$3 a watt for the first 3,000 of installed solar watts and \$2 for the next 7,000 watts and \$1 a watt for the next 10,000 watts.

Through these programs, I will cover nearly three-quarters of the installation cost. To help with the rest, another District incentive program requires Pepco to purchase electricity generated by renewable sources, a small amount of which is solar. These so-called Renewable Energy Credits will amount to more than \$1,000 a year for my 2.8 KW system.

Consequently, I should be able to pay off the system within three to five years. Some in the coop are even getting a quicker payoff. The panels are designed to last 25 years so this is an investment for the future.

Pepco won't buy our electric-

ity, but we do get a credit when our system generates more electricity than our household uses. On sunny days, I have the pleasant sight of watching my meter move backwards. This should cut my electricity bills in half.

So far, about 13 Capitol Hill residents have installed solar units through the co-op and another 16 are planning on moving ahead later this year, says solar co-op founder and Hill resident Michael Barrette.

The Hill group was modeled on a similar co-op in Mount Pleasant, which began about three years ago. Its creator, Anya Schoolman, estimates about 45 solar units were installed through the co-op last year and another 25 residents have put solar on their roofs so far this year.

The path has not always been smooth, however. District officials who administer the program fell behind in releasing the money and appeared to have misplaced \$1.4 million of the \$2 million allocation for the first year. But now things are back on track and Schoolman notes right now may be an important time to apply for DC grants before the fiscal year comes to an end Sept. 30.

There have also been a few issues with Pepco over meters but that too seems to be working toward resolution. Nevertheless this remains a work in progress.

We are trying to create a new world for clean, non-fossil-fuel electricity generation as well as jobs and a new U.S. market for renewable energy. While my panels were design in German, they were assembled in New Mexico.

Through my lifetime, I have watched energy tax breaks pour out for oil, coal and nuclear power companies. It seems about time for energy tax breaks to come to regular people trying to make a difference in the world.

Jeff Johnson is a Capitol Hill resident who often writes on energy. Reach him at jjohnsondc@earthlink.net. To learn more about solar and the Hill Fair and Tour, go to www.capitol-hillenergycoop.org. ★

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