

Community Solar Projects Sprout Up Across US

COMMUNITY SOLAR PROJECTS SPROUT UP ACROSS US
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Inspired by Al Gore's documentary on global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth," more than three years ago, 12-year-old Walter Schoolman told his mom he wanted to help reduce his impact on global warming and "go solar."

The Schoolmans, along with another neighborhood family, started to research what it would take to install solar panels on their roofs.

"We called a couple of installers and had them come out, and it was completely confusing and expensive," said Anya Schoolman, Walter's mother. "We were like 'Oh my gosh it's going to be a lot harder than we thought.'"

Schoolman said if they were going to go through the trouble of vetting installers, learning about solar economics and figuring out the federal and local solar rebate programs, they wanted to have a larger impact than just two houses.

The Schoolmans and one other family created a survey and sent it out to other households in their densely populated Washington, D.C., neighborhood. Soon they had 50 homeowners interested.

"We were really shocked," said Schoolman.

The 50 plus households banded together to form the **Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative**. In the three-and-a-half years since the group formed, they have worked to promote energy efficiency in the neighborhood, get solar-friendly legislation passed in the D.C. council, help each other navigate the complexities of solar rebate programs and, lastly, organize group purchases of solar panels.

Between last July and this May, 45 members of the **Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative** had solar panels installed on their roofs. Schoolman said the group selected five installers co-op members could choose from, and added the installers chosen competed "very intensely" for the group's business.

The retail price of installing solar panels in the D.C. area, according to Schoolman, can range from \$15,000 to \$30,000, depending on the size of the system. After the 30 percent federal tax credit and a generous local rebate, the actual price is reduced by about half. There is also an estimated 25 plus years of saving between a third and half off your electric bill.

"The money is not the biggest thing," added Schoolman. "The biggest thing is having that support. Most of my members say they would have never done this without the group."

The Mount Pleasant Solar Co-op is now organizing a second round of solar installations, and Schoolman expects this round will have between 10 and 20 households participate. She also estimates there are at least six other community solar projects in the D.C. area alone.

The co-op is one of a growing number of solar community projects forming nationwide. Widely thought of as something a household does on its own, the complexity of the solar panel process and the initial upfront costs are making group efforts attractive. Neighbors can share information, vet installers together, and in some cases, drive down the retail cost of solar installations.

In Portland, Ore., community solar projects, like **Solarize Portland**, have become popular within the past year.

"We call it a community education and volume purchasing project," said Tim O'Leary, co-founder of Solarize Portland. "The idea is basically to do outreach and organize as many people as we can in a fairly small area who are interested in installing solar."

The group organizes educational workshops to help residents learn the ins and outs of getting panels installed on their homes and helps them navigate the financial incentives. They also vet contractors and select one to do all of the site assessments and installations.

Solarize Portland started the first round last May in Southeast Portland, and the installations spanned from September to February. Initially they expected around 50 households to participate, but in the end, 145 residences installed solar panels.

"When the first round started, the average price for a residential installation in Portland was about \$9 per watt, and our price is \$6.80 per watt, so that's about a 25 percent discount right off the top, which is thousands of dollars," said O'Leary.

A second round of installations in Southeast Portland has just begun, and 1,000 households have expressed interest. O'Leary expects at least 150 households to follow through and get solar panels installed. In addition, Solarize Portland has recently started programs in Northeast and Southwest Portland.

To put the group's impact into perspective, in 2008, the year before it was started, just 38 households in all of Portland had solar panels installed.

O'Leary said he got the idea to form Solarize Portland from San Francisco-based company **1 Block off the Grid**. Unlike the Mount Pleasant Solar Cooperative and Solarize Portland, 1BOG, as it's commonly referred to, operates on a national basis and is a for-profit company.

Started in late 2008, **1BOG** goes into different neighborhoods around the country, gets a large group of homeowners together who are interested in installing solar panels, educates consumers on solar energy, vets installers to find the best one and then negotiates a reduced price for the households in the group.

The chosen installer then pays 1BOG a referral fee for each home. The fee is the same, regardless of which installer wins, to assure customers the referral fee does not affect the selection decision.

"We remove the really tough parts out of buying solar from the equation," explained Dave Llorens, founder of 1BOG.

He estimates households who go through 1BOG typically get their solar installation bill reduced by 15 percent. But, he added, the community aspect of the program is as appealing as the price reduction.

"A big part of the reason this works is because it's a group purchase," he added. "You're just infinitely more likely to believe this proposition of solar if your friend is like 'Hey, I checked this out and it looks really good and you should check it out, too.'"

In 2009, the company helped 600 homes across the country install solar panels. This year, they expect that number to increase to 3,000 homes.

1BOG now has active solar campaigns in Northern New Jersey, San Antonio, New Orleans, Denver, Phoenix and several cities in California. A campaign in South Jersey is launching on June 1.

There are many variables involved in figuring out the cost of a solar panel system. These variables—which include the size of the installation, location of the home and state and local incentives and rebates—can cause the price to vary by tens of thousands of dollars.

For a solar panel cost estimate, **Find Solar** has a [solar calculator](#) on its website. To find out what solar energy rebates and incentives your state offers, visit the [Database of State Incentives for Renewables & Efficiency](#).

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