

Sun Blocks

A solar co-op in Mount Pleasant struggles to get started.

By Ruth Samuelson

Posted: June 11, 2008

Mount Pleasant is a place that has enthusiastically embraced going solar. More than 200 people in some 70 households joined a co-op that has worked through most of the red tape and the science to figure out how to get beyond the inconvenient truth of heating and lighting their homes with electricity alone.

They've worked with their councilmember, they've signed up a volunteer accountant and pro bono lawyers from two corporate law firms. Everything is in place to make this happen—except the solar panels.



Solar supporters (from left) Walter Lynn, Anya Schoolman, Chris Graves, and Diego

After two years in existence, the group has yet to make a single installation.

“I have four different members that for different reasons have been ready to do it. But they all just decided: Let’s just hold out a little longer,” says Anya Schoolman, one of the co-op’s founders.

The project has developed in stages, says Schoolman, an environmental consultant who’s worked for the Environmental Protection Agency. She started the co-op with her teenage son, Walter Lynn, his best friend, Diego Morley, and Diego’s father, Jeff Morley. The four of them received so much interest at the outset, they stopped looking for

more members.

The group’s next task was figuring out how to make solar energy affordable. For the average homeowner, upfront costs would be about \$20,000. Yet with the right package of discounts, tax rebates, and renewable energy credits, and with a plan to take payments out of monthly electricity bills, it could be well within reach of most—if only energy utility Pepco jumped on board.

And that's where the plan has hit its biggest snag.

In late 2007, Pepco officials met with co-op leaders and seemed supportive. They even talked about financing the group's installation costs, says Schoolman, who testified to this effect before a city council committee in January.

The company's real attitude became clear roughly a month later. On Feb. 22, the Washington Business Journal published an article about the solar co-op and a council bill, introduced in late 2007 by Ward 3's Mary Cheh, to create an independent utility that would manage sustainable energy usage in D.C. Under the bill, Pepco would be strongly encouraged to buy solar-generated electricity from projects like the Mount Pleasant co-op—further reimbursing members for the high cost of their solar units.

If the bill were to pass, "our ability to do things with Mount Pleasant Solar and other entities would be limited," Steve Sunderhauf, manager of program design for Pepco, states in the article. "We wouldn't recover [costs] on any of the initiatives on our end."

The quote, and the entire article came as a blow to the group, says Chris Graves, who runs Switch On Energy, the solar contractor working with the co-op.

"There is nothing in the legislation that would prevent Pepco from promoting energy-efficiency projects....They actually said that to us in a meeting," says Graves. In the last few months, Pepco hasn't been saying much else. The co-op has lost touch with the utility and has basically given up on any possibility of assistance, he says.

Now, both the co-op and the utility are looking toward the council bill to decide the future of alternative energy in the city. The co-op needs the legislation to pass so members can pay for their solar systems. Pepco's been circulating letters and memos to various councilmembers, denouncing certain provisions and stating that the legislation cuts funding for a program to help low-income residents pay their energy bills.

That claim is not true, says councilmember Cheh: "Pepco, for its own reasons, opposes the passage of this bill. In order to try to sow seeds of doubt among other Councilmembers, the company has repeatedly sent out false information," Cheh wrote in a statement to Washington City Paper.

On Monday June 2, the bill was unanimously approved in a 5-0 vote by the Committee on Public Services and Consumer Affairs. The council is expected to vote on the legislation in July. Pepco's not wasting time: The day after the committee decision, the utility again sent around information that the bill would drain \$2.2 million in funds to help cover low-income residents' energy costs.

“We wouldn’t put it in there if it was wrong,” says Pepco spokesman Robert Dobkin. “We stand by what we said. There’s a dispute between us and Mary Cheh on a number of issues.”

What the fight comes down to is an energy turf war, says Graves.

The bill would create a new utility, one that’s D.C.-funded and committed to sustainable energy. The operating budget for this utility would start at \$7.5 million and increase to \$20 million by its fourth year. Various companies, including Pepco, would be able to bid for the contract, but the power is, quite literally, up for grabs.

More than a year ago, Pepco completed its own plan to launch sustainable energy programs in the District. But the proposal hasn’t been approved, in part because of Cheh’s pending legislation, says Pepco’s Sunderhauf.

“The difficulty with [Cheh’s bill] is it creates a new organization that doesn’t exist. All of the individuals that would have an interest in it are already our customers. We already have them, and we know a lot about them,” he says. “We don’t see it necessarily as a wise use of funds to create another entity in the District of Columbia to do stuff that the company is already prepared to do.”

Meanwhile, the co-op’s future also hangs in the balance. For two years, the group has held meetings and sent out e-mails updating participants on the project. But members still aren’t sure when they’ll receive a financing plan or their solar energy.

“I don’t think it’s knowable yet [but] the sooner, the better,” says co-op member Robert Guitteau Jr. “You have to seize the moment and go with it. We’ve made the decision already that we will participate. My family’s totally behind it.”

For the co-op leaders as well, the process has been exasperating. Schoolman expected that the co-op could purchase solar units in bulk and get a discount, depending on how many people signed up. It turns out that concept didn’t fly with many companies. Schoolman says she contacted 20 contractors—“like, the whole list that the D.C. department of energy had”—and only got calls back from three people. It took more than a year to just find a contractor—Graves’ company—willing to work with the group. Now, again, the group’s at a critical point.

“I just hope that Pepco can just understand that this is totally in their interest,” says Morley. Which raises the question of what happens if the bill doesn’t pass.

Long, long pause. “Uh, I don’t know. I don’t know,” says Morley. “We don’t have another option that’s as convenient as Pepco. But there are other people out there that want to buy energy. So, we’ll find another partner.”