'SOLARIZE HARRISONBURG' SHINES BRIGHT

More Than 65 Homes Have Solar Panels Through Program

Posted: June 20, 2015 **By ELAINA SAUBER**


H. Bishop Dansby has a photovoltaic array of solar panels for producing electricity on his home. (Photo by Austin Bachand)

H. Bishop Dansby explains the evacuated tube solar panels for heating water on the lawn at his Keezletown home. (Photo by Austin Bachand)

HARRISONBURG — Harrisonburg can now add "Solar Town" to its list of nicknames.

More than 65 homes installed solar panels over the last six months through the Solarize Harrisonburg program — the largest of nearly three dozen such programs coordinated through Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Community Power Network.

Because of its success, a second round of installations are in the works for September.

The solarize program, also known as a co-op, includes Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. It gives members the benefits of buying solar panels at a discount through bulk purchasing from a single installer, which helps members decide on systems that work best for their home.

"This is not your father's solar. … The prices have dropped 50 percent in the last five years," Community Power Network Communications Manager Ben Delman said.

Solar systems are made up of photovoltaic cells, which are arranged together to form solar panels and convert energy from the sun into electricity. Inverters then convert the electricity from direct current to alternating current to power buildings,
according to information from VA Sun, the Virginia branch of Community Power Network.

Solar panels have a 25- to 30-year life expectancy, and most residential systems are still connected to the power grid, which ensures residents will have power in their homes at night and on cloudy days.

The co-op's selection committee chose Sigora Solar of Waynesboro as its installer after Community Power Network issued a request for proposals to solar companies.

Joy Loving of Grottoes led Solarize Harrisonburg with sponsorship from the Climate Action Alliance of the Valley. Loving had solar panels installed on her property in 2012 and said she decided to get involved with the co-op to increase the Valley's "solar footprint."

"The program seemed like a good way to boost the amount of solar installed, and hopefully, would help feed more installations as more people heard about it," she said.

Loving said she hopes to extend the second round of signups for the co-op, which is planned to launch around Sept. 1, to Shenandoah and Page counties.

The total cost of a system depends on its size and a household's energy use. Co-op members receive a roughly 30 percent bulk purchase discount and a 30 percent federal tax credit to offset the costs.

For an average system of three to five kilowatts, the average cost was a little more than $10,000, Delman said, which is all-inclusive.

Some factors can increase the cost, though. For Keezletown resident H. Bishop Dansby's 6.3-kilowatt system with 20 panels, the costs were a little higher because his home has a cedar roof, requiring special brackets for mounting the panels. But he says that's what makes solar a unique industry.

"They didn't just sell a unit that's the same for every house; it has to be adapted to the needs of the house," he said.

For city residents Carl Droms and Adrie Voors, who don't use air conditioning in the summer, a 3.5-kilowatt system with 11 panels was more than enough.

"It's a big upfront investment and not everyone can afford it, but as it becomes more common and universal, hopefully the price will come down," Droms said.

Under the co-op, Delman said a homeowner's energy savings in the first year is around $600, as well as about $150 in Solar Renewable Energy Credits, which owners receive for the electricity their system generates. Money can also be saved through net metering, which carries over any excess electricity produced in one month onto the next month's electric bill.

Over the last year, the price of electricity increased by 3 percent in Virginia, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. If the annual increase continued at that rate, it would take roughly 10 to 12 years to make a return on one's investment, Delman said.

In addition to cost-savings, co-op members were inclined to make the transition to solar for various reasons.

"It's very much a matter of personal choice," Loving said. "I wanted to reduce my carbon footprint, but I also wanted to have the freedom to be able to choose."

Dansby said he wanted to take direct action to help reduce carbon emissions contributing to climate change.

"If you can't get policies for renewable energy that reduces emissions, then buy what you can from the marketplace to accomplish the same thing," he said.

For more information about round two of Solarize Harrisonburg, visit http://www.vasun.org/solarize-virginia/solarize-harrisonburg/.

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