

IT'S TIME TO SOLARIZE HOMES

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By **JOY LOVING**

At a recent public forum in Harrisonburg, more than 100 attendees learned of an exciting new possibility for lowering their electric bills by installing a solar photo-voltaic (PV) system. The Climate Action Alliance of the Valley hosted this event, which was, I believe, a first for the Harrisonburg area. The people gathered at Massanutten Regional Library on June 2 listened to several subject-matter experts explain how a group could form a “solar cooperative.” Through the cooperative, they could combine their buying power to lower the cost of both the equipment and the installation. Under such an arrangement, participants would be obligated only to use the cooperative’s selected vendor.

First to speak at the forum was Richard Baugh, Harrisonburg City Council member and former mayor. Mr. Baugh expressed his desire to learn about the possibilities.

Addressing the forum next was Anya Schoolman, executive director of the Community Power Network. As the CPN web site states, this organization is “a national nonprofit that helps communities build and promote local renewable energy projects and policies. [In 2007] Ms. Schoolman ... led a city-wide effort in Washington, D.C., to make solar accessible and affordable to all residents. She has assisted more than 300 homeowners in Washington, D.C., to go solar and has helped ... form a citywide organization called DC Solar United Neighborhoods (DC SUN). Ms. Schoolman ... also ... manages programs to promote solar and local economic development. Community Power Network is currently supporting state projects called Maryland Sun (MD-SUN), West Virginia Sun (WV-SUN) and Virginia Sun (VA-SUN), as well as policies and project models for bringing solar to low-income households.” (www.communitypowernetwork.com)

Ms. Schoolman described the “Solarize” movement, a grass roots effort in many states including Washington, Oregon, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas. She also noted that several localities in Virginia are working to establish solar cooperatives — Solarize Richmond (www.solarizerva.org/), Solarize Blacksburg (www.solarizeblacksburg.org/), and Solarize Charlottesville (headed by LEAP, Local Energy Alliance Program, [/leap-va.org/](http://leap-va.org/)). CPN is supporting the Blacksburg effort.

CPN works with interested people in a geographic area to initiate formation of a solar cooperative. Once established, CPN can then assist the cooperative with (1) advising on organizing and operating such a group, (2) developing a request for proposal based on the group’s wishes, (3) locating interested installers and overseeing the selection process, (4) determining individual members’ specific needs, and (5) finding financing. A solar cooperative’s members can be residential, commercial, or non-profit. They can be neighbors, a homeowner’s association, homeowners or businesses located relatively near each other, a faith community, non-profit organizations, or business organizations.

Also speaking at the forum was Tom Benevento, director of the New Community Project in Harrisonburg and a specialist in sustainable development and energy efficiency. Mr. Benevento stressed the importance of increasing a building's energy efficiency and effectiveness before making a decision to "go solar." Then one is, he said, in a much better position to know their "true" energy needs and size a solar system properly, thus not overspending for electricity they won't use.

The last speaker was Ivy Main, current chairman and long-time renewable energy director of the Virginia Sierra Club. Ms. Main provided an overview of Virginia's renewable energy legislation and policy. She also offered pros and cons for those considering installing solar systems to meet their electricity needs given Virginia's laws and regulations.

As a cost-conscious consumer and owner of a home powered by solar electricity since October 2012, I welcomed the opportunity to learn about the growing solarize movement. The many questions from other attendees yielded even more useful information. Since the Harrisonburg event took place, I have asked for status updates from several Virginia "Solarize" efforts, and I look forward to better understanding their experiences and results.

I believe many people could benefit from knowing more about their renewable energy alternatives, especially solar. Anyone interested in further information can contact CAAV at contactcaav@gmail.com.

Ms. Loving is a resident of Rockingham County.