

Leases featured in new solarizing campaign

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The Community Environmental Council kicked off the second phase of Solarize Santa Barbara on Tuesday, offering leasing programs for solar panels.

"The one difference this year is that we're also offering leasing, kind of like you would lease your car," Megan Birney, renewable energy specialist for the CEC.

"So, if you're paying over - let's say \$100 a month in electricity - a lease can make a lot of economic sense for you. You can actually start saving money from day one," Ms. Birney said, adding the two solar-energy companies the CEC has endorsed offer 20-year leasing options.

"So, both companies this year are offering leases. Last year only one of the companies did. So, that's something we're really pushing because people are seeing their electric bills go up and we'd really like to help them bring it down and switch to a fossil-free source of fuel," she said.

Solarize Santa Barbara was launched in April 2011 at the home of solar-energy proponent Daniel Emmett.

Ms. Birney said, depending on one's usage, a solar panel will cost a South County homeowner anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000.

The lease option, she said, is based on kilowatt hours generated and runs anywhere from 10 to 20 cents per kilowatt-hour depending on a variety of factors.

"It's just kind of a different model," Ms. Birney said of leasing.

Now through Nov. 9, qualified Santa Barbara homeowners interested in powering their homes via solar energy will be able to take part in a so-called group-purchasing program, or lease program.

After reviewing seven applicants for the program, the CEC has thrown its weight behind two regional solar-energy companies: Santa Barbara-based California Solar Electric and San Luis Obispo-based REC Solar.

"What it is, is anybody in South County, Santa Barbara can sign a contract. We've negotiated a very good price with these installers on a technology that we vetted. We've also vetted the installers," Ms. Birney told the News-Press.

"So, the idea is, we're trying to make it easier and cheaper for people to go solar," she said.

Last year, the CEC endorsed REC Solar and Santa Barbara-based SunPacific Solar Electric.

"There are so many good companies out there, it was a really hard choice - it is every single year. So, we don't want to say that other companies weren't good companies. It's just, these are the ones that fit best with our program," Ms. Birney said.

This year's Solarize Santa Barbara campaign was announced at the home of 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf, who decided she wanted to add solar panels to her home after attending last year's Solarize Santa Barbara launch.

"For me, it was an easy sell," Ms. Wolf said of the switch from strictly utility-generated electricity to a solar-electricity system, adding it took more convincing before her husband got on board with the idea.

Ms. Wolf wouldn't go on record about the cost of the SunPacific solar-panel system, but said it has reduced her monthly electric bills.

"Our monthly bills used to be about \$200 a month. Now they're about \$20 - sometimes less," she said, adding the panels are "more effective" than she and her husband anticipated and that they draw a small fraction of their electricity from the utility.

While Ms. Birney said the "payback" on a solar unit is anywhere from eight to 12 years, Ms. Wolf said the return on her solar unit will likely be realized sooner.

"I think that payback is going to be more immediate," she said, adding the panels also increased their home's value.

"We knew it's a good investment. It's like anything you do in your home and because, you know, they're so many tax benefits and rebates."

Santa Barbara homeowners and parents Chris and Stacey Ulep recently remodeled their San Roque home and opted to lease solar panels as their monthly electric bill was consistently more than \$100 a month.

Since moving back into their home Feb. 1, the Uleps have found their leased solar panels have generated all of their electricity.

"We've actually generated all of our electricity from the solar panels," Mr. Ulep said, adding his Edison bill is a "nominal" \$1.90 administrative fee.

Mr. and Mrs. Ulep later told the News-Press they spent \$5,000 up front for the solar-panel installation and that, for the duration of the 20-year lease, their electric bill will only exceed \$65 a month if they draw more electricity than their leased solar panels are able to generate.

"If we overconsume, then we pay SCE for whatever we buy," Mr. Ulep said. "We will pay SCE for anything more."

Mr. Ulep said he and his wife haven't had a single electrical problem since the installation.

To shed light on the Solarize Santa Barbara program, the Community Environmental Council is holding three informational workshops in the next few months at various county locations. For a complete list of workshops, go to www.cecsb.org.

The Community Environmental Council is a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit organization focused on energy efficiency, renewable energy and alternative transportation. For more information on Solarize Santa Barbara, call 963-0583.



The Community Environmental Council launched its second year of Solarize Santa Barbara with a press conference at the home of 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf, who has installed solar panels on her roof.
STEVE MALONE/ NEWS-PRESS