



GOING SOLAR

WRITTEN BY PETER SUROWSKI

Solar power is like pennies from heaven, so it's a good thing a growing number of locals are catching them. Since 1986, more than 300 Long Beach homeowners have put up solar panels. That may seem like a pretty small number, but 75 percent of those people did it in the last four years. That means it was a little slow to catch on, but its making up for lost time now.

The popularity of solar panel installation is booming because people are realizing the benefits of solar power. Wes Harding, a green contractor and a teacher at CSULB and Long Beach City College, thinks that's the

reason. Every semester, the classes he teaches on environmentally-friendly building practices get fuller. "There's a real need and a real push for it on multiple levels," Harding said. "There are people who just want to lower their utility bills and some people who are really environmentally conscious."

Eco-conscious residents know solar power is good for the environment for two main reasons; it's infinite and it's clean. The sun will shine its light for as long as the earth is around. Unlike oil — which we will eventually use up — it's an unlimited, abundant resource. Also, solar

power doesn't pollute. This is important, considering more than half the electricity created in the United States comes from coal burning plants, and those plants together are the biggest polluters in the country, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.

But there may be more to solar panel installation's growing popularity in this city. Local officials are embracing solar power like never before. In 2006, the city put a 750-kilowatt solar panel system on the roof of the Long Beach Convention Center. In 2008, it put six solar panel systems up on free-standing posts at the municipal airport.

One of the commission's first tasks was to talk to locals and find out how they could make it easier to put up solar panels. They found two answers: make it cheaper and make it faster. In a lot of cities, getting permits to put in a solar power system takes weeks and costs hundreds — and sometimes thousands — of dollars. "We realized this was something the community wants and needs," said Roy Bronold, one of the city's inspectors. "We cut down on both of these."

When Bronold and his coworker, Meredith Reynolds, talk about the city's efforts to get people to go solar, their excitement is obvious. "Long Beach is one of the most solar-friendly cities," Reynolds said. She described their latest project, which will start this month. They will give out about 400 no-cost permits for solar thermal panels. Solar thermal panels are different from the better-known photo-voltaic panels people use to power their homes. They can only make heat, which the homeowner can use to warm their homes and their water. Reynolds hopes that will give solar thermal's popularity a kick start.

Jeff Jeannette, an architect and Belmont Shore resident, loves the panels he put on his 2,800-square-foot home four years ago. "The coolest thing is when you look at your meter in the back and you watch it go backwards," he said. "You know you're doing something right."

During the day, Jeannette's 5-kilowatt, 58-panel system feeds the city's power grid. During the night, it starts sucking power back out. The result is that he uses just a bit more than he generates, which earns him an electric bill of about \$35 a month. He didn't put his panels up to save money, though. He did it to save the environment. "The generation of electricity by power companies consumes a lot of our resources," he said. "I'm just taking the opportunity to tread a little lighter on them."

It's going to be a long time before solar power can provide the 3 billion kilowatt hours the city needs to function. But, if that day comes, imagine how clean the air will be. ■



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