

Business

Homeowner co-op puts solar panels on roofs

By **Kevin Spear** · **Contact Reporter**

Orlando Sentinel

SHARE THIS



Each home will get most of its electricity from solar panels

NOVEMBER 8, 2015, 9:00 AM

A fledgling solar nation is taking shape in Central Florida with more than two-dozen members of an east **Orange County** cooperative now getting power-producing panels on their rooftops and another co-op gearing up in the county's west side.

As interest for solar grows among utilities and big companies such as Wal-Mart, navigating prices and technology can still be daunting for individuals. While not yet a major force across the country, co-ops promise to provide strength in numbers.

That spurred formation earlier this year of a small group called Central Florida Solar Advocates, which, in turn, launched a cooperative of homeowners, East Orange Solar Co-op, within Orlando and **Winter Park**.

What followed were organizing meetings, a call for bids from 45 companies and ultimately the vetting of eight installers that responded. That activity prompted similar organizing west of Interstate 4, which will sign up members through early next year and is now waiting for responses to its call for bids.

Article continues below ↓

Community Power Network, a nonprofit in Washington D.C., has been tapped for its expertise in organizing solar cooperatives – 29 in the nation with more than 500 members in the past two years.

One of the founders Central Florida Solar Advocates, Mary Dipboye of Winter Park, said she knows of no other such initiative in Florida, although small groups may have formed without drawing attention.

She said her group is looking to push the grass-roots movement statewide through word of mouth and by getting a grant that would enable a staffer to promote the concept.

Dipboye said that while solar panels and related equipment have declined in cost in recent years, it is still expensive and the expectation of high-volume discounts is the prime driver behind the co-op ventures.

By the time enrollment for East Orange Solar Co-op closed Oct. 31, 80 homeowners had signed up as members, which basically indicated their desire to participate.

Some dropped out after realizing there were obstacles such as too much shade from trees on their homes, having roofs that weren't in adequate shape or that prices didn't fit their budgets.

By late last week, 30 had signed contracts for installation of solar panels and another 20 had requested proposals.

Article continues below ↓

The installer selected by East Orange Solar Co-op is SEM Power LLC of Tampa.

Roger Hughes, the company's director in Central Florida, said the East Orange cooperative is getting prices that are 20 percent to 30 percent lower than what a homeowner going alone could secure.

"Our profit margin is thin because we wanted to expand into Central Florida," Hughes said.

Dipboye's panels were installed two weeks ago. Her system has 22 panels, which can provide an output of 5.6 kilowatts, or an estimated 60 percent of the electricity used in her home.

Article continues below ↓

The system cost \$13,600, which Dipboye expects to defray with a federal tax credit of \$4,100. The net price of \$9,500 will take an estimated eight years to pay off through reduced electric bills from the city of Winter Park, she said.

Apart from reducing her electricity costs, Dipboye's motive is to help lessen climate-altering pollution from electric utilities that burn coal and natural gas.

Other members, Dipboye said, may want independence from utilities, or they may see solar investment as a financial winner.

To that end, putting up residential solar panels in the city of Orlando is a little easier because of a rebate from Orlando Utilities Commission.

While many utilities nationwide are cracking down on residential solar as harmful competition, OUC credits its customers a nickel for every kilowatt-hour of solar electricity, which is enough to light 10, 100-watt bulbs for an hour.

Michael Cohen, another founder of Central Florida Solar Advocates, had SEM Power install panels on his Orlando home last week.

His system is more complex than many because surfaces of his roof have numerous angles. It cost \$15,700, or about \$11,000 after the federal tax credit, to put up 26 panels rated for a combined output of 6.7 kilowatts.

A system that size will produce an estimated 10,400 kilowatt-hours annually, or an amount equal to nearly all of the electricity used in his home last year, Cohen said.

He hopes to nearly cancel his power bill each year, as well as earn credits that he can apply toward his OUC water bill.

And, he made a point of adding in an email: "My solar system will save 212 tons of carbon dioxide during the 25-year life span of the system."

The newer West Orange co-op now has 22 members and expects to receive bids today from solar installers.

That group will have two more public meetings Saturday at 10:30 a.m. in the Apopka branch of Orange County's library system and 1:30 p.m. at the county library branch in Windermere. The co-op expects to pick an installer next week.

The co-op's information is at cfsolaradvocates.org

kspear@orlandosentinel.com

Get The Morning Report Newsletter delivered to your inbox.

SIGN UP

[Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 2015, Orlando Sentinel

This article is related to: [Orange County](#), [Winter Park](#)

[VIEW COMMENTS \(13\)](#)

Content Continues Below

