

Solar Co-ops Surge West to Ohio in Community Power Network



LEFT PHOTO-
Community Action at
the DC Public Service
Commission Fighting
for Clean Energy

RIGHT PHOTO-
Anya Schoolman
standing on roof
with neighbor in
Mt. Pleasant where
the first co-op started.

“If we’re going to go solar, we might as well do the whole neighborhood.”

This is what I told my son, Walter, back in 2006, when he urged our family to install solar panels on our home. I didn’t know it at the time, but this suggestion wouldn’t just help my family or my neighbors go solar. It started a movement that has helped more than a thousand people and counting, go solar.

Walter took my suggestion and ran with it. He and a friend recruited dozens of neighbors to join a neighborhood solar purchasing group. At the time, we didn’t know much about solar ourselves. So the group worked together to learn about solar technology and the process of going solar. That group got more than 40 people to go solar and sparked interest across Washington, D.C.

This led to the creation of DC SUN, a citywide network of solar advocates. Through DC SUN, we fought for improvements to the city’s renewable portfolio standard to help create a vibrant solar market in the city. The experience helped us develop a streamlined process by which we help communities go solar via the solar co-op.

The solar co-ops are bulk purchasing groups that help homeowners get a discount on the installation of panels on their homes. The co-ops work in geographically proscribed areas to recruit and educate members to go solar. Once a co-op group has enough members

(usually 20-30), the group issues a request for proposal from local installers and works with our staff to understand the proposals they receive. Co-op members then hold a selection committee meeting to select the company’s proposal that is best for the group. Every proposal includes a standard price per watt that the installer will charge to install solar on a co-op member’s home. The installer then works individually with co-op members to design a system for their home. At this point, co-op members can decide whether or not they want to go solar.

We work closely with installers to make sure the process is value-added to the market. We are installer neutral and believe in a transparent competitive market. Our work has helped many companies scale up their residential installation business. Rather than spending valuable time finding and educating customers, the companies can focus on what they do best—installing solar systems on people’s homes.

The success of this process demonstrated that the co-op model could work elsewhere. Soon enough, I was getting calls and emails from people around the country who wanted to take on projects in their own community. It was from this interest that the Community Power Network was born. We now manage state-based programs in D.C., Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and our newest program, in Ohio.

Like their D.C. counterpart, these programs help educate people about the benefits of solar energy by helping communities go solar and strengthening the community of local solar advocates.

Each state program runs its own listserv that serves as a forum for solar advocates and supporters to share local solar news, get advice about their own solar systems, and discuss solar policy in their state. The groups also produce a monthly newsletter and maintain an active social media presence to strengthen communication within the community.

Across our network, we’ve helped communities launch more than 58 co-ops. In total, these co-ops have connected with more than 5,500 interested homeowners, of whom 1,000 have gone solar. We’ve saved co-op members more than three million dollars off the cost of their installations as well.

As impressive as these numbers are, the most important aspect of it for me is that we’re empowering individuals and communities to go solar and then fight for policies that enable more people to go solar. This helps create an even stronger base of solar supporters and builds upon the virtuous circle started a decade ago by my son and his desire to put solar on our home.

— Anya Schoolman, Executive Director,
Community Power Network,
Washington, D.C.