

NEWS

Satellite Beach earns SolSmart badge of honor



John Fergus and John Stone. PHOTO: GEORGE WHITE

STORY BY GEORGE WHITE STAFF WRITER
georgewhite32951@gmail.com

With 17 residents already generating electricity using solar panels hooked to the grid, Satellite Beach has been recognized as a national leader for encouraging solar market growth.

The SolSmart program, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative, has recognized 22 communities across the country for making it faster, easier and cheaper to go solar. Satellite Beach was the only city in Florida named by the organization.

A SolSmart designation shows a community is "open for solar business," helping to attract solar industry investment and generate economic development and local jobs.

"The communities receiving SolSmart designations are now well positioned to attract new solar businesses and take advantage of the dramatic job growth we've seen in the industry," said Andrea Luecke, president and executive director at The Solar Foundation. "We hope many more cities and counties will be encouraged to join SolSmart and help even more homes and businesses go solar."

SolSmart aims to designate 300 communities during the three-year, federal-funded program.

According to the SolSmart website, to achieve designation, cities and counties had to take steps to reduce solar "soft costs," which are non-hardware costs that can increase the time and money it takes to install a solar energy system. Examples of soft costs include planning and zoning; permitting; financing; customer acquisition; and installation labor. Soft costs now represent roughly two-thirds of the total price of an installed residential system, compared to one-third for the hardware. Reducing soft costs leads to savings that are passed on to consumers.

Satellite Beach participated in a lengthy application process showing a long history of being environmentally conscious and citing new city action to streamline the permitting process for solar, said building official John Stone.

"It's a theme throughout Satellite Beach," he said.

The city's SolSmart application noted Satellite Beach has established a Sustainability Board and put in place a quick-turnaround permitting review process for solar projects.

The city charges minimum permitting fees (\$74) for the installation of photovoltaic solar panels, and has enacted regulations to allow installations only by experienced contractors approved by the City Council.

"We've been interested in putting solar panels on our city buildings for years with the objective of generating enough electricity to achieve a zero electric bill," Stone said.

Nearly achieving that goal at his

home is sustainability board co-founder Josh Pause.

Last year he installed a 30-panel photovoltaic array with two inverters on his Pineapple Street house with about \$21,400 from loan programs requiring no money down. Since then his electric bill went from an average \$150 to just a \$9 accounting fee.

The savings over time, which come in part from electricity channeled back into the grid, offset the loan payment over a period of about six years, he said. Other benefits include an increase in property value and home equity, he said.

He has a web-based program that shows exactly how much electricity his array creates and how much it reduces his carbon footprint.

"The bottom line is it's now cheaper to have solar than it is to not have it. The goal is to not have an electric bill. It's all about the money when you show somebody an electric bill that is basically zero, but there are important environmental benefits as well," Pause said.

When SunShot was launched in 2011, it set a goal for solar energy to be cost-competitive with traditional forms of electricity by 2020 without subsidies, and trends are moving in that direction.

Besides being the only Florida city named in the first group of 22 municipalities, Satellite Beach was one of only 14 cities nationwide achieving the Gold designation.

Other Gold cities included Austin; Boulder, Colo.; Columbia, Mo.; Fremont, Calif.; Fort Collins, Colo.; Gladstone, Mo.; Milwaukee, Wisc.; Minneapolis; San Carlos, Calif.; Santa Monica, Calif.; and Santa Rosa, Calif.

SolSmart Bronze cities included Burlington, Vt.; Claremont, Calif.; Denver; Philadelphia; Redwood City, Calif.; Saint Paul, Minn.; and Somerville, Mass. ■



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