

Mt. Pleasant Solar Co-op

What is the Mt. Pleasant Solar Co-op?

In September 2006, two teenagers from a Washington, D.C. neighborhood devised a plan to help their community become more environmentally friendly. Walter Lynn and Diego Arene-Morely, concerned by the ever-growing threat of climate change, wanted to find a way to integrate solar energy into their Mt. Pleasant neighborhood. With the help of their parents, Anya Schoolman and Jeff Morely, along with additional support from the community, Mt. Pleasant was able to develop a successful solar co-op that now has over 200 members from over 70 households.¹

Solar co-ops in the greater D.C. area community-run program intended to produce clean, environmentally friendly electricity in the neighborhood. Community members join the co-op on a voluntary basis and have the opportunity to have a solar energy system installed on their roof at reduced cost (achieved through discounts obtained through bulk purchases).² The solar co-op model focuses on educating the community on solar and draws on the skills and resources of its members to advance the program's goals.³ In addition to making solar more affordable and available in its own community, the Mt. Pleasant Co-op also seeks to bring the technology and its benefits to neighborhoods across D.C.⁴

How Was the Co-op Established?

When the co-op was created, its goal was to simply install solar on a few homes in the neighborhood. It quickly became apparent, however, that because D.C had no local programs to help reduce the upfront cost of solar, such a small-scale undertaking would be expensive. Ms. Schoolman, having experience advising environmental non-profits, understood that they could bring solar to Mt. Pleasant if they could get the neighborhood to work together. To accomplish this, several challenges had to be overcome:

- Neighbors had to work together to set goals and develop a strategic plan of action
- The community had to locate solar installation companies likely to offer bulk-purchasing discounts
- Government officials, local businesses, and environmental organizations willing to support local legislation to promote solar had to be identified
- The co-op needed to help its members start and navigate the installation process⁵



Installation Underway on Mt. Pleasant Rooftop
Source: Mt. Pleasant Solar Co-op

How it Worked

The power of a solar co-op is the power of collective action. To successfully establish a solar co-op in Mt. Pleasant, the group's leaders distributed leaflets explaining the program and its efforts in order to inform the community on the opportunity and gauge interest in participation. Once the co-op had garnered sufficient community support, the neighbors submitted electricity consumption data, which was used to determine the size of solar energy system their home could support. The co-op coordinated with Switch Energy, a solar energy installer, and assessed over 70 roofs for their suitability for solar panels. Switch Energy also helped determine the payback period for the systems based on the availability of federal incentives and local renewable energy credits (RECs). Co-op members with ties to legal firms in the city were able to secure

pro bono assistance with overcoming any regulatory or liability issues the program might encounter, including zoning issues and navigating utility rules governing interconnection and metering.⁶ Finally, the co-op lobbied the city council, which had previously demonstrated a commitment to renewable energy by establishing a renewable portfolio standard, to include provisions allowing for the creation of solar renewable energy credits (SRECs) – a goal that was eventually achieved through the Clean and Affordable Energy Act of 2008.⁷ Prior to the passage of this Act, system owners simply received bonus credit for the RECs generated using solar energy.⁸ This Act also established a Renewable Energy Incentive Program (REIP), which provided rebates for the installation of new solar energy systems. Shortly after these programs became official, solar installations began in Mt. Pleasant. Within three years of the idea’s inception, 50 co-op members had installed solar.⁹

Lessons Learned

As a pioneer in creating solar co-ops, Mt. Pleasant learned a number of important lessons on its path to success. Co-op leaders quickly began to appreciate the value of effective communication. Not only must specific, concise goals be set and a strategy be devised, but these must be clearly conveyed to the members of the co-op. Reflecting on this experience, co-op members noted that more effort could have been put into information and data management in the early days of the program, which would have made it easier to collect and access information on current – and possible new – members. Advocacy is also a vital component in developing and maintaining a successful co-op. A strong core group, composed of vocal individuals of all ages, is a necessity for long-term success.¹⁰

The Next Steps

The success of the Mt. Pleasant Solar Co-op has led members to both continue their efforts locally – helping solarize 100 rooftops by the end of 2010 – and to expand the model to other communities. Through the DC Solar United Neighborhoods (DC SUN – www.dcsun.org) project, a coalition promoting the use of solar energy throughout the city, motivated D.C. residents have helped establish solar co-ops in their own communities.¹¹ The Capitol Hill Energy Co-op has completed over 40 installations, and ten other co-ops have been established in neighborhoods across the city.

Find the Mt. Pleasant Solar Co-op on the Web!

For more information, visit the co-op’s website at www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org. The website contains information on the program and its efforts, a collection of articles and interviews, as well as an excellent video featuring members of the community. A short documentary on the program, *How to Start a Solar Co-op*, is available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG3OMfHNJf4.

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¹ www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/about.htm

² <http://grist.org/article/2009-09-16-interview-solar-activist-anya-schoolman/>

³ <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/solar-at-home/2009/08/13/the-pleasant-way-to-go-solar-neighborhood-cooperatives/>

⁴ www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/about.htm

⁵ www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/pdfs/2011-03-31_solartoday.pdf

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ http://green.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ddoe/publication/attachments/CAEA_of_2008_B17-0492.pdf

⁸ www.dsireusa.org/documents/Incentives/DC13F.htm

⁹ www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/pdfs/2011-03-31_solartoday.pdf

¹⁰ www.mtpleasantsolarcoop.org/pdfs/2010-02-28_cbj.pdf

¹¹ www.cleanenergyauthority.com/solar-energy-news/dc-co-op-helping-residents-install-solar-022811/