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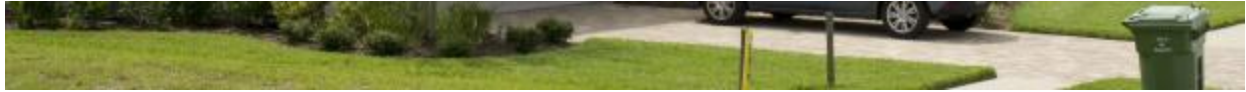
By JAKE MARTIN (/authors/jake-martin-1)

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Want to go green and save some green? St. Johns Solar Cooperative ready to launch





CHRISTINA.KELSO@STAUGUSTINE.COM Solar panels are seen on the rooftops of several homes in the Madeira neighborhood of St. Augustine on Friday, August 4, 2017.

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Local proponents of clean energy say going solar has never been more affordable to the average homeowner, thanks largely to improved technology and a 30 percent federal tax credit. A new effort called the St. Johns Solar Cooperative looks to expand on those savings by increasing the buying power of residents who are considering installation of solar panels on their roofs.

Compassionate St. Augustine's Environmental Rights Initiative is sponsoring the co-op in partnership with Florida Solar United Neighborhoods, or FL SUN, and the League of Women Voters in Florida.

According to FL SUN, solar co-ops can provide discounts of about 20 percent, based on bulk purchasing

by residents and organizations with a shared interest in making the transition.

The group uses a competitive bidding process to select a single company that will install systems on all of the participating homes. Each participant signs his or her own contract with the installer, but everyone gets the discount.

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Warren Clark, with Compassionate St. Augustine, said his involvement started a few months ago when he and his wife were looking to put solar panels on their roof but got three completely different bids for the project.

“We just put it off,” he said. “We couldn’t make up our minds.”

Later, when they were visiting friends in St. Petersburg, Clark saw signs for something called the St. Petersburg Solar Cooperative, one of the first such co-ops in Florida, which led him to FL SUN.

Clark said FL SUN’s role is essentially to do the technical legwork and heavy lifting throughout the process. He said the co-op will need at least 30 people to be a viable effort.

According to Clark, there are about 10 co-ops across the state and nine more, including St. Johns, in the hopper. He said existing co-ops range from 125 to 500 participants.

Clark said once they have their membership organized, a selection committee will vet bids from competing companies to do the installations and determine what kind of product they’re willing and able to pay for as a group. He said the whole process from launch to actually seeing panels on rooftops could take just a matter of months.

Residents and organizations interested can sign up for free and there is no obligation to install the panels. The registration period is open until Nov. 8.

For more information or to sign up, go to [flsun.org/st-johns](http://flsun.org/st-johns).

Floyd Phillips, president of the Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center, has already been living in a solar powered-home in the Madeira community for about two years.

He said he decided to go solar because he’s a conservationist and built what he said was one of the first energy-efficient homes in St. Johns County back in 1998.

“It’s all about saving money and, at the same time, being concerned about the environment,” Phillips said.

He said the average homeowner shouldn’t balk at the upfront costs of

installing the panels, mostly because of the long-term benefits.

"The cost has come way, way down," he said. "I would highly recommend that anyone give it some serious consideration."

Mayor Nancy Shaver said she thinks there's some considerable support for seeing more solar in St. Augustine and that she's explored the idea for her own home.

She said the city has looked at its buildings, and will look again, to see if, for example, the parking garage could benefit from using solar shades over cars on the top level.

"I think it's always worth exploring a means of energy that is sustainable and resilient," Shaver said. "You always have to take the long view if you're going to make that kind of investment."

Still, she said the prices have come down "pretty dramatically" over the past few years and the potential for making the city a little more sustainable is obvious.

"We are called the Sunshine State, after all," Shaver said.

There will be a kickoff event 10:30-11:30 a.m. Tuesday on the front steps of St. Augustine City Hall. Speakers will include Clark, Phillips, Shaver and County Commissioner Henry Dean, as well as representatives of FL SUN.

Additionally, there will be an information session 7 p.m. Aug. 15 at the Willie Gallimore Center, 399 Riberia St., 7 p.m. Sept. 13 at the Village Church at World Golf Village, 4229 Pacetti Rd., and 7 p.m. Oct. 10 at the Palm Valley Community Center, 148 Canal Blvd.

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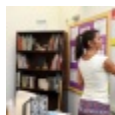


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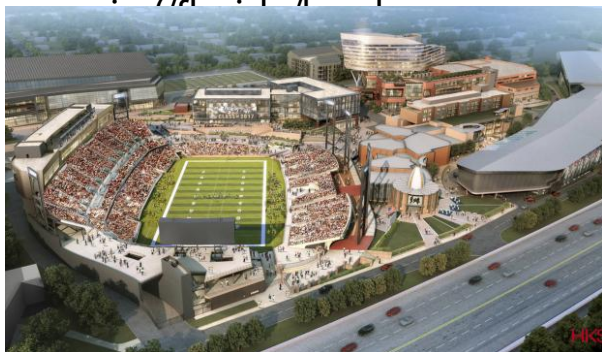
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