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Solar Co-op launched in county

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Author/Byline: JAY MEISEL; Staff Writer Section: Highlands News-Sun Page: 1 Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1150)

SEBRING — Before having a solar energy system installed, Sebring City Councilman Charlie Lowrance paid average monthly electricity bills between \$300 and \$400 and even higher amounts during the summer.

Now, his bills are only a fraction of that. His July 2017 bill was \$37, he said.

That's part of the reason why Lowrance was on hand Wednesday to help launch the Highlands County Solar Co-op, aimed at bringing people together for bulk orders to get solar energy discounts.

The Highlands County Solar Co-op is in partnership with Solar United Neighbors of Florida, an organization that has helped organize cooperatives in several areas of Florida. The Highlands County co-op is the 31st in Florida. According to its web site, the Highlands County chapter of the NAACP and Highlands County Audubon are sponsoring the solar co-op.

For many, the high installation costs of solar energy panels and equipment has been an impediment.

But, Lowrance said that with the discount resulting from the co-op and federal tax credits will help the item become more palatable.

"It's going to get down where it's more feasible to do," he said.

But how much money people will save through the co-op is uncertain.

Heaven Campbell, a program associate with Solar United, said she could not provide a definitive savings, as it can vary for each homeowner.

People have until July to join the co-op. There's no cost to join and there's no obligation resulting from joining, Campbell said.

Co-op participants will select a single company to complete all of the installations. They will then have the option to purchase panels individually based on the installer's group rate, according to Solar United's web site. By going solar as a group and choosing a single installer, participants can save off the cost of going solar and have the guidance from the experts at Solar United Neighbors.

To join, people can go to solarunitedneighbors.org/florida/go-solar-in-florida/go-solar-in-a-florida-group/highlands-county-solar-co-op/.

The co-op will be holding three informational sessions.

The first one will be at 5:30 p.m. Friday, April 27 at the Board of County Commissioners, 600 S. Commerce Ave., Sebring. The second one will be at 6 p.m. Tuesday, May 12 at the Highlands County Extension Office, 4509 George Blvd., Sebring, and a third will be at 6 p.m. Wednesday, June 20 at the Redlands Christian Migrant Association office, 100 Ernest E. Sims St., Avon Park.

After the membership deadline, installers will contact members to see if they want to pursue solar energy for their homes, Campbell said.

Saving money on panels and installation aren't the only reasons people are promoting solar energy.

Dale Gillis, president of the Highlands County Audubon Society, said the organization is concerned about climate change. Solar power may be helpful in forestalling that, he said.

Caption: JAY MEISEL/STAFF Participants help launch the Highlands County Solar Co-op Wednesday at Sebring Solar Park. Behind them are solar panels. FILE PHOTO A solar array sits at the corner of Avon Park resident Rob Jordan's yard in this October 2016 file photo. The panels power Jordan's whole house and then some, putting some energy back onto the grid.

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