

Halton homeowners encouraged to 'see the light' about solar power

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Some believe in the saying that money is power, but for those people willing to change the way they heat their homes, power can be money.

The Halton Environmental Network (HEN) is undertaking a project that will see solar panels installed on some homes throughout Halton as early as this fall. The initiative is known as the Halton Residential Solar Project (HRSP).

It will give homeowners information about the options of installing either a solar hot water system or a larger photovoltaic (PV) system to generate electricity for the entire residence.

HEN's target is a minimum of 50 homes in Halton. The incentive comes in the form of bulk-buying discounts offered by the solar panel system vendors.

HEN is an umbrella group consisting of regional non-profit environmental organizations such as BurlingtonGreen, the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG), the Bay Area Restoration Council (BARC), Conservation Halton and Protecting Escarpment Rural Land (PERL).

"There are a number of benefits to going solar. The environmental benefits include curbing climate change, reducing smog from coal plants during times of peak summer energy, and reducing dependence on polluting sources of energy, said Kurt Koster, chair of BurlingtonGreen and a member of the HRSP project.

Koster said the West Toronto Initiative for Solar Energy (WISE) finished one solar panel residential project in 2007, installing solar systems on 86 homes in one neighbourhood, and is now working on a new set of solar roofs in 2008 and 2009.

Lisa Seiler, project co-ordinator for the HRSP, said \$12,000 is the starting price for a photovoltaic system. She noted people can opt for the smaller solar hot water system.

"For solar hot water systems (solar thermal) there is also the benefit of a relatively quick payback, depending on your family's hot water usage. One reason for the quick payback is the generous rebates, in excess of \$1,300, available from the provincial and federal governments. And as the price of energy rises, the payback period will be shortened," said Koster.

The payback for the larger photovoltaic system is longer, due to the high cost of PV equipment.

"The government of Ontario has initiated the most generous incentive in North America for PV grid-connected systems through the Standard Offer Program (SOP)," noted Koster.

"Under SOP, the government pays the homeowner 42 cents per kilowatt-hour of electricity generated, for a guaranteed period of 20 years. When you compare this to the 5-6 cents per kilowatt-hour you pay on your hydro bills, this is a pretty good deal," he said.

"The payback hinges on the details of the Standard Offer Contract offered by the province. The payback could be in the neighbourhood of 15 years based on today's energy prices, which are going up, and will reduce the payback period."

The Our Power website (www.halton.ourpower.ca) states that solar PV systems that produce electricity can reduce home energy demand by about 20 per cent. Systems are scalable, meaning you can always add more panels in the future if you have the space. The website also says solar PV is virtually maintenance free. There are no moving parts, pumps or motors and panels are usually guaranteed for about 25 years.

The HRSP team has set up a series of meetings for citizens to learn about the system options. Each meeting will include an overview of solar technologies and the HRSP, with time for questions afterward. Vendors will be in attendance. Meeting dates in Halton include:

- BURLINGTON - Tomorrow (Sept. 25), 7-9 p.m., Burlington Central Library, 2331 New St., Holland Room; contact Cathy Ridsdale at 905-635-4033
- MILTON - Wednesday, Oct. 1, 7-9 p.m., Milton Sports Centre, 605 Santa Maria Blvd., Banquet Room; contact Tara Bonin, 905-875-4045
- HALTON HILLS - Thursday, Oct. 2, 7-9 p.m., Georgetown Cultural Centre, 9 Church St., Gallery; contact Carolyn Martin, 905-877-2579

An Oakville meeting was held Monday (Sept. 22)

For more information, or to add your name to the list of potential buyers, e-mail info@the-hen.net or visit the website www.halton.ourpower.ca.