

22 Allegheny County towns participate in initiative to even out solar-system costs

By Tory N. Parish

Published: Wednesday, October 3, 2012, 9:30 p.m.

After living in Aspinwall for four years, Reed McManigle and Susan Orr decided to add a solar-panel system to the 97-year-old home in August.

“(We did it) for the environmental benefits, for one thing; also for the financial benefits. I had some savings and I needed a new roof. I figured while I’m doing a new roof, let’s look into solar,” said McManigle, 54, whose cost will total \$20,000 after state rebates and federal tax credits.

The electrical inspection, permit, and plan review to install the system cost \$430, paid to a third-party company.

By contrast, in Economy, the permitting process costs \$65 and is done in-house, said Joe Morinville, president of Energy Independent Solutions, the Robinson-based company that installed their system. In some towns, fees exceed \$1,000, or some don’t require permits, he said.

The wide range of costs and rules among municipalities for installation of solar systems prompted 22 towns in Allegheny County and two in Beaver County to participate in an initiative to streamline the process.

An environmental advocacy nonprofit, Citizens for Pennsylvania’s Future, known as Penn Future, is using a \$317,000 SunShot program grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to craft a model municipal ordinance for solar zoning, coding and permitting.

Most of that money went to Downtown-based Environmental Planning and Design, which met with municipal officials, PennFuture and its partners to craft the standardized regulations.

PennFuture recommends the ordinance include a \$250 flat fee to

municipalities, for permitting and rooftop inspections of solar panels on homes and small businesses, said Sharon Pillar, project manager. It would classify the systems under “accessory use,” a category that typically includes satellite dishes and sheds.

The ordinance should be ready within two months, she said.

The SunShot program grant will pay for researching ways to create financing options, such as low-interest loans, for people who want to install solar panels but can’t afford them, Pillar said.

“If you can spread out the cost of the system through the loan or something ... then it becomes a lot more feasible,” she said.

The cost to install a system on a home can range from \$15,000 to \$20,000 after tax-credit incentives, Morinville said.

With about 7,000 solar systems, Pennsylvania ranks eighth nationwide in the number of systems. Western Pennsylvania, with 300, ranks far behind other regions in the state, Pillar said.

Morinville favors the SunShot initiative because it would make it easier for his company and others to bid on work, he said.

It would add transparency to bidding because many municipalities don’t know how much money is paid for permitting and inspections. Third-party companies come up with the charges, he said.

Officials with several municipalities, including Baldwin, Collier and Dormont, said they haven’t received permit applications for solar panels but decided to participate in SunShot to be proactive.

McManigle is satisfied with the panels on his and Orr’s home. Their first electric bill since the installation covered about half a month with the panels but was 50 percent lower than usual, he said.

“So I’m expecting a bill any day now and I’m hoping it will be a negative bill, actually,” he said.

Read more: <http://triblive.com/neighborhoods/2647280-74/solar-panels-pennsylvania-cost-future-municipalities-pennfuture-system-tour-aspinwall#ixzz28Qrzyh2B>