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Sunrise for solar? Bulk purchasing among hopeful signs

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By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

More than 40 years ago, the Beatles recorded a song about hope called "Here Comes the Sun." In those heady days, solar power for the masses also seemed imminent. But taking advantage of solar energy's vast potential has proved exceedingly challenging.

Now finally, the sun is rising as a viable power source for our homes and buildings, even here in Seattle. A wealth of solar-energy projects, resources and products are transforming that potential into a bright reality.

Q: It's hard to believe solar energy makes sense in Seattle. Isn't that a stretch?

A: Believe it. Effective solar power doesn't require Arizona's climate. Our best role model is Germany, which gets fewer annual hours of sunlight than Seattle but generates more power from the

sun than any other nation.

The Puget Sound region now boasts a critical mass of utilities, nonprofit organizations and private businesses helping to advance solar power. Solar panels and hot-water systems have been installed at hundreds of Seattle-area homes in the past five years.

Q: What's hot in solar power here now?

A: The most promising trend is bulk purchasing. Homeowners in a neighborhood join together to buy solar electric panels all at once, allowing them to negotiate a lower price and reduce their individual costs.

Successful in Portland, this concept was recently introduced here by the nonprofit Solarize Seattle program (www.SolarizeSeattle.org). For their first project, in the Queen Anne neighborhood, residents have until April 22 (Earth Day, fittingly) to apply to participate.

One Block Off the Grid (www.1bog.org), another bulk-purchasing effort for solar panels, has launched programs in more than a dozen cities and is taking sign-ups in Seattle.

For residents unable to install solar panels (if their rooftops are too shaded, for example), a new approach being promoted by Seattle City Light is "community solar," in which individuals jointly own or financially support a solar project on public property.

Q: What are the best solar options for the average homeowner?

A: A solar water-heating system, using rooftop solar collectors, can make a good investment. These often cost less than \$6,000 and may pay for themselves in 10 years or less through energy-bill savings.

For a standard solar photovoltaic system that provides electricity, you can choose from an increasing array of products and contractors. One brand of solar panels, Silicon Energy, is even

manufactured locally, in Marysville. Seattle City Light's informative online resources (www.seattle.gov/light/solar) include a list of six experienced, local solar-installation contractors.

For most homes, installing solar electric panels will cost \$16,000 to \$30,000, with a payback period of 15 to 25 years. You can lower your costs with tax credits and other government financial incentives, including a substantial discount for using solar equipment made in Washington state. Check with your local utility for details. Note that one of those tax breaks, a 100 percent exemption from Washington state sales tax for solar electric systems, expires June 30.

Q: How about other regionally based solar resources? And where can I actually see these home systems?

A: We're solar-information rich in the Northwest, with useful resources such as www.NorthwestSolarCenter.org and www.SolarWA.org. Also consider attending the Shoreline Solar Project's SolarFest (www.ShorelineSolar.org) on July 16 and the big Seattle-area solar tour held every fall.

Q: I'm not quite ready to invest in solar panels. Are there any intriguing smaller-scale solar-energy projects?

A: For a fun, practical way to harness the sun, try solar cooking. Make your own solar cooker with scrap boxes and aluminum foil, or purchase a small solar oven for less than \$150. These are ideal to steaming rice or vegetables, and if you use it in the backyard during the summer, you'll keep your home cooler by not using your stove. Search online to find local solar-oven-building workshops and other resources.

Will Seattle, the capital of coffee and rain, ever truly become a solar-energy hotbed? Now's the time to find out. As another song puts it, "The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades!"

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