# Solarizing Woodstock and beyond

9-11 minutes

Kirk Ritchey of Woodstock Transition and John Wackman of
Solarize Hudson Valley. (photo by Violet Snow)

With Central Hudson's rates going up and New York State groping
its way into an initiative it calls Reforming the Energy Vision (REV),
incentives are growing for bringing solar power to homes and small
businesses. Meanwhile, the concept of Community Choice
Aggregation (CCA) shows promise for localizing energy distribution
in community-controlled networks to make prices more stable and
sources more reliable.

Consider what it takes to make solar power highly accessible to
residents and small businesses: government policies that
encourage renewable energy;

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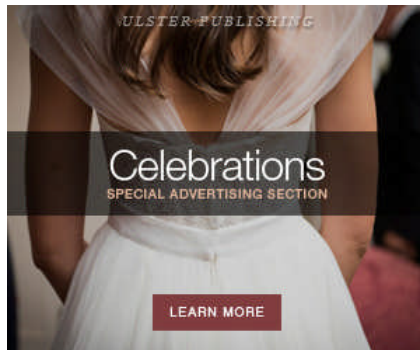
- affordable prices;

- creative financing;

- qualified installers within easy reach;

- confidence to take the big step;

- community support.

On Monday, July 13, from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Sustainable Hudson Valley and Woodstock Transition will sponsor an event at Woodstock's town hall on the nuts and bolts of going solar. A similar presentation is scheduled for Rosendale on Wednesday, July 15, 7 to 8:30 p.m., at Rosendale Cafe, 434 Main Street.

Both events will introduce the Solarize Woodstock-Rosendale program, a form of CCA, which reduced prices by bringing together a mass of customers, both residents and small businesses. (Industrial solar is addressed by other state programs.) Solarize also vets and approves qualified local installers, who will be on hand so people can meet them and make appointments for site assessment to determine the practicality and cost of installing solar at their homes. A representative from RUPCO will explain how low-interest loans and on-bill financing make solar affordable even for low-income residents. More such events will be taking place in the area through November.

Unlike the for-profit solar CCA's such as Sungevity and Solar City, Solarize is completely non-profit, sponsored by NYSERDA, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, and supported by a grant obtained through Catskill Mountainkeeper and Sustainable Hudson Valley.

Most for-profit CCA's tend to use non-local installers and the cheapest solar panels, which are not of the highest quality. John Wackman of Solarize Hudson Valley, which helps organize the Woodstock-Rosendale program, said his group is signing up as many local installers as possible, along with some regional and national firms, after careful vetting and NYSERDA approval. One of the criteria considered is the quality of the materials used. More work for local installers will mean more jobs available in the region. Wackman noted that SUNY Ulster has a highly respected program for training solar installers.
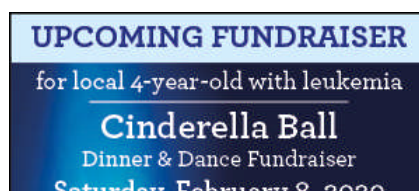
At each of the Solarize presentations, RUPCO will be present to help connect homeowners to low-interest loans and arrange on-bill financing, which links loan payments with the home's utility bill. Thus the loan is paid off gradually, in amounts that result in an immediate net lowering of monthly energy charges, when offset by the savings in power generation. If the owner sells the house, the remaining loan payments are passed on to the homebuyer.

Solarize is engaging the community with solar home tours, in which people can visit houses already equipped with solar power and learn from the homeowners' experience. Plans are also in the works for neighborhood meetings in people's homes. "Maybe potlucks, so people can hear from their neighbors," said Kirk Ritchey of Woodstock Transition, a citizens group promoting local sustainability. "We may do brown-bag lunches at businesses. We want to give multiple avenues of information."

"People are more positive about something when they hear others who've gone through it tell their story," agreed Wackman. "Many people want to be part of something larger. We're making our community greener, more energy-efficient, and energy-independent."

Ritchey added, "And everyone will save money in the short and long run."

Minimizing 'peaker' plants

For those who find their properties can't support solar installation — and for everyone else — Citizens for Local Power (CLP) is working on programs to localize energy and promote ownership of renewable energy sources. One example is the construction of community solar arrays that residents can buy into, stabilizing their energy costs. The time is ripe for such efforts, said Jennifer Metzger of CLP, as the state's approach to energy supply is undergoing major reform, and informed citizens can help make critical decisions about the future of our power grid.

An immediate incentive for change comes from Central Hudson's recent announcement that it would raise its rates for electricity delivery as of July 1. Following a two-year price freeze after the purchase of the utility by the Canadian company Fortis, residential

rate hikes will be phased in over three years, going up 0.34 percent in the first year, 3.42 percent in the second and 4.78 percent in the third, for a total of more than eight percent. Similar hikes apply to gas delivery.
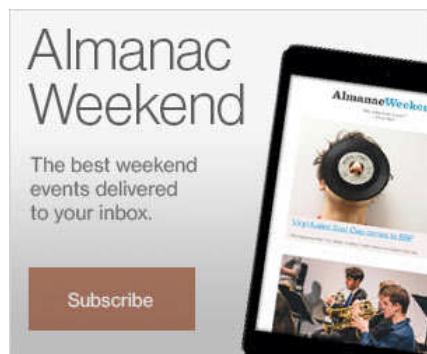
The New York State Energy Plan, released on June 25 is part of the REV, the state's response to aging infrastructure, widespread power outages from hurricanes, and blackouts and brownouts on hot summer days when air conditioning usage peaks. "Ten days out of the year," said Metzger, "New York uses three to four times the energy as on a normal day, straining the grid and threatening the reliability of the power supply. And now we have more hot days than in the past." Therefore, "peaker" plants — most of them inefficient fossil-fuel-fired facilities — are maintained throughout the state at great cost, just to bring them into service on those few days a year of peak demand. All power customers pay a surcharge on their bills to pay for those plants. "There's also a daily peak, when people get home and turn everything on," Metzger pointed out. "These peaks are not reflected in our utility bills, so we don't know about them."

One strategy for addressing this problem is known as "islanding." Either an individual building or a group of buildings can be connected to a reserve power supply that fires up at times of peak system load. For example, certain buildings, such as hospitals that have their own generators, can be linked with surrounding homes to create an island. The state is investing in development of such microgrids. Kingston and New Paltz have both applied for state funds to conduct feasibility studies for creation of microgrids.

In addition, technology is advancing to the point where it may soon be practical for homes to use batteries to store energy, and utilities will pay homeowners for going onto battery power at peak times. "When we can combine storage with renewable energy," said Metzger, "there are lots of possibilities."

The 600-page energy plan sets new, aggressive targets to reduce

climate pollution and expand renewable energy, calling for a 40 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and an 80 percent reduction by 2050. The plan also aims to meet 50 percent of the state's electricity needs from renewable sources by 2030. It encourages Community Choice Aggregation, which would revamp the present system of large-scale, centralized generation of energy over long distances to a distributed system that relies on local energy resources. It's up to communities to jump in and decide how they want those local sources to be configured.

One such option is a community solar facility, which can be located on either public or private property. Residents and businesses subscribe to purchase a portion of power generated by the facility. Although subscribers are still receiving energy from the grid, they receive credit on their utility bills for offsetting the load at the community level. At some point in the process, lines may be run to connect the subscribers directly to the community array. "Solar is a predictable cost over time," said Metzger, "but energy prices on the wholesale market go up and down. So this method stabilizes your bill, in addition to supplying clean, renewable energy." It also has the potential to provide local energy when other parts of the grid experience overload or go down.

"For so long, utilities have had a monopoly on our power," Metzger observed. "Now we can all be involved in making decisions about where our power comes from."

Solarize Woodstock-Rosendale will hold an information session at the Woodstock Town Hall, 76 Tinker Street, on Monday, July 13, 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Another session is scheduled for Wednesday, July 15, 7 to 8:30 p.m., at Rosendale Cafe, 434 Main Street, Rosendale. See https://solarize-hudsonvalley.org. For more information on Community Choice Aggregation, visit www.citizensforlocalpower.com.

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