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Start of a solar boom

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Gainesville has become a leader in the use of solar energy in Florida, installing 17 percent of the solar electric projects that received state rebates over a two-year period ending in February

Local officials and business leaders say they hope that's just the start of the city's solar boom.

Developer Ken McGurn said he's replacing the roof on his Sun Center building downtown to prepare for a 100-kilowatt solar installation that would be the biggest in the city. He said he's working with other business leaders in an effort that he hopes will result in 14 new solar systems.

"We're breaking some new ground here," he said.

While such efforts might stand out in the Sunshine State, they look less impressive outside its borders. California has embarked on a \$2 billion effort to put solar panels on a million rooftops, while Germany has used incentives to become a world leader of solar in a country not known for sunshine.

Harald Kegelman, founder of the nonprofit SolarCity Gainesville, said European efforts shows the distance that Florida needs to make up. All the projects installed across Florida under the state rebate program produce less energy than a single installation in a Swiss soccer stadium, where the World Championships are being played this summer.

"Gainesville is not bad with respect to other communities in Florida," Kegelman said. "We're way behind compared with other states and countries."



Aaron Daye/The Gainesville Sun
Tom Doughty, left, and Wayne Irwin, president of Pure Energy Solar, install solar panels on Pat and Eve Wheeler's roof.

Local officials are considering ways to boost the use of solar. Ideas include paying GRU customers more for selling unused electricity back to the grid and allowing Alachua County residents to pay for solar projects on their property taxes over an extended period of time.

But there are obstacles to expanding the use of solar. Local protections for trees and other rules can hinder solar installations. The state program that defers the cost of installing solar equipment is running out of money.

Costs can be a major impediment for installing solar. Photovoltaic systems that convert the sun's rays into electricity typically cost about \$10 per watt, meaning even a small residential unit costs at least \$20,000 and larger commercial systems more than \$200,000.

McGurn said he's banding business owners together to create economies of scale for solar projects. He said he's hoping solar panels will top downtown buildings and stand-alone installations could be put in places such as the Gainesville Regional Airport.

"I'd like to use up every dime of the state money in our town," he said.

But dwindling funds in the state rebate program could complicate those plans. The state rebate paid \$4 per watt, but initial funding ran out in February.

While the Legislature approved another \$5 million, a backlog in applications means about \$3.5 million is already allocated and the rest could be gone by the time the program officially begins in July.

"Unless you install before June, you don't have a prayer of getting the rebate," said Tom Lane of ECS Solar Energy Systems, the older and most active solar company in Gainesville.

Lane said Gainesville has done well for its size, but projects such as a 250-kilowatt installation at a Sarasota landfill dwarf anything constructed here. But he said GRU has been a leader among utilities in providing solar rebates.

Since January 2007, GRU has provided a \$1.50 per watt rebate for solar panels installed on seven businesses and 25 homes. The installations represent about 218 kilowatts of electricity - or enough to power 25 homes for a year, according to the utility.

The utility's push for solar is part of the effort to diversify the energy supply beyond fossil fuels, said David Barclay, utility analyst for GRU.

"Everything that's going on these days is pointing us toward renewable energy, energy efficiency," he said.

The City Commission will consider a plan to pay customers the retail rate for unused electricity they sell back to the grid. Customers are currently paid a lesser rate and the change mean an extra \$100 per year for the typical customer, Barclay said.

The utility is also considering a plan to contract with a business that would install large-scale projects. Barclay said the business would be able to take advantage of rebates for which government entities such as GRU are disqualified.

"Without getting a third-party involved, we're leaving money on the table," he said.

An Alachua County energy task force is considering a measure to give residents an easier way to pay for energy conservation upgrades and solar equipment. Modeled after a program in Berkeley, Calif., residents could pay for solar equipment on their property taxes over an extended period of time.

The idea is similar to the way some road-paving projects are funded, said Sean McClendon of the county's Environmental Protection Department.

"There are still disincentives for putting these things on people's roofs," he said.

Developer Richard Schakow said Gainesville's tree regulations have also complicated efforts to install solar panels. He's developed two zero-energy homes in northwest Gainesville, an effort he said has been made more difficult and costly by tree protections.

"There needs to be a distinction between removing a tree for the hell of it and removing a tree to put solar in to create clean energy," he said.

Homeowners association and historic society rules can also impede solar projects, said Wayne Irwin, president of Pure Energy Solar. He said restrictions against putting panels in the best location - facing south and away from shade - can cause systems to be inefficient.

"It's really a shame to see these systems installed improperly," he said.

Kegelmann said he's working to attract a solar-panel assembly plant to the area. Doing so would eliminate expensive shipping costs, he said, while providing more local interest in the move to solar. "I would like us to be in control of our own energy," he said.

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