



Solar Tour Offers Insider Tips

By Bryan Finlayson and Oliver Peterson

For the past four years, Long Island residents have been showcasing their private power plants to visitors as part of a campaign to spread awareness about solar energy.

Energy-conscious homeowners are welcoming visitors into their homes for a chance to get a flavor of how solar energy works during an October 6 event, dubbed Solar Tour 2007. The event is sponsored by Renewable Energy Long Island (RELI), an East Hampton-based solar energy advocacy group.

Ninety-six homes across Long Island with roofs outfitted with solar energy panels are participating in the 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. event, said RELI director Gordian Raacke. Last year, the tour attracted 3,800 visitors, he said.

"I've been surprised at the whole spectrum of people who attend. It's blue collar and white collar," Mr. Raacke said.

The owner of Bridgehampton's GreenLogic Energy, Marc Clejan sells and installs photovoltaic, or solar panel, systems for area homes and businesses. But he returns for his second year on the Solar Tour as a homeowner, not a salesman, eager to share his knowledge about the renewable energy source. Last year 30 people dropped by Mr. Clejan's house and his children served drinks and donuts while he spoke with visitors.

"The first thing I did was go on a Solar Tour," Mr. Clejan said, explaining how the event of which he is now part inspired his business. He said solar panels are available in a number of sizes and materials, as well as a range of price points. Mr. Clejan's home on Squires Path in East Hampton has a 2.5-kilowatt system with Sharp panels flush mounted to his roof, generating an annual 2,500 kilowatt hours of energy which he says puts a nice dent in his electric bill.

Mr. Clejan said his house could have "zeroed out" its energy use if the roof could fit more panels, and he's considering building an extension to accommodate that installation. As it is now the black, shiny panels are not visible from the front yard, and Mr. Clejan

said he's proud of the attractive installation. "A properly designed system can look really good," he said, noting that aesthetics is the biggest concern for his potential customers as well as visitors on the tour. Mr. Clejan said panels can now be integrated into roofing materials or at least installed flush, as he's done.

"That's why the tour is good," he said, explaining that participants will see a variety of panels and installations at the homes and businesses included throughout the East End. "There really are a range of solutions," Mr. Clejan said, later adding that leaving a low carbon footprint and saving money on his electric bill were his primary reasons for using solar power.

Increasing numbers of Long Island homeowners are following suit and installing solar panels on their rooftops in an effort to eliminate or lower their monthly electricity bills. In 2000, only four homes were equipped with solar panels. Now, according to the Long Island Power Authority (LIPA), 983 Long Island homes have rooftop panels and are connected to LIPA's distribution system—also called the grid.

Frankie DeMarco's Westhampton Beach home is on the tour for the fourth time this year, and features solar panels he installed himself in 2004. "I'm a bit of a do-it-yourselfer," Mr. DeMarco said, explaining how he came to spend a week putting 16 solar panels onto the roof of his cottage without paying for any professional help. He said he enjoys hosting visitors on the tour and inspiring them to join the solar revolution.

Doing something ecologically friendly has been important to Mr. DeMarco since childhood, he said, but it was LIPA's "forward thinking" offer of a \$4.30 per watt reimbursement as an incentive to go solar that made him take the jump.

With the money from the LIPA rebate, Mr. DeMarco's system cost him next to nothing.

Today, Mr. DeMarco's family's 840-square-foot cottage actually creates a surplus of energy, earning them a LIPA rebate of \$60 to \$100 per year.

"We generate more juice than we use," Mr. DeMarco said, though he noted later that they spend most of their time in New York and keep their power use down when they're in Westhampton Beach.

At least one neighbor has followed Mr. DeMarco's example and gone solar, but he believes the trend will slowly snowball, getting bigger each year.

"I think we'll see more and more," Mr. DeMarco said.

Mr. Clejan said his company installed more than 40 photo-voltaic systems on the South Fork and a couple on Shelter Island over the last one and a half years. "I think we're now the biggest player out here," he said.

Go Solar, a Riverhead-based company established in 1979 and responsible for 144 solar panel installations islandwide, has seen a recent spike in sales. The company has been installing solar panels on the roofs of about two homes per week, a significant increase from previous years, according to Go Solar co-owner Gary Minnick.

"We're really on the fly, we have a warehouse stacked for nine to 10 jobs," Mr. Minnick said.

Extensive LIPA rebates and state tax credits are also making it easier for Long Islanders to own the systems.

"There is an awful lot of interest," Mr. Minnick said. "It's usually people who are looking at stabilizing their energy bill who are doing this."

Mr. Clejan's said his home system retails for \$26,000, but a rebate from a combination of LIPA incentives reduced that by roughly \$16,000, bringing his net cost down to less than \$10,000, even before factoring in his reduced electric bill. "That savings is going to keep growing every year," Mr. Clejan said, explaining that electricity rates are increasing because of the rising costs of fossil fuels.

He said solar panels cut the net cost of electricity in half by investing ahead of time. "It's like going to Costco and buying your power in bulk," Mr. Clejan said, equating installing a system to buying power for the next 30 years at half the price.



Marc Clejan talks about the solar panels he installed on his home in East Hampton. Mr. Clejan is participating in this year's Solar Tour, sponsored by Renewable Energy Long Island.

OLIVER PETERSON

The system has its drawbacks, however. A state law requires investor-owned utilities in New York State to allow residential customers to connect solar photovoltaic systems to the company's grid.

When the panels are not producing electricity, at night or on overcast days, the grid-connected systems automatically switch to LIPA's distribution, maintaining a constant energy supply. However, as a result of being connected to the grid, the system automatically shuts down during blackouts, said LIPA spokeswoman Elizabeth F. Flagler. A state law requires inverters to shut down when the grid goes down.

Mr. Clejan said blackouts and brownouts could be avoided if more people had solar panels because during times of peak demand, like a hot summer day, the panels function at their highest level and don't contribute to the excess energy consumption.

Because homeowners are often at work during the day, Mr. Clejan said panels could even add a surplus to the grid, as in the case with the DeMarcos, which would help everyone. To that end, he added that one residential photovoltaic system improves air quality by a reduction in carbon emissions equal to the benefit of planting one acre of trees. "That's a pretty cool thing," he said.