

Things to Investigate When Deciding to go Solar

by Marc Candelaria



The winter months bring short periods of daylight, so most people aren't thinking about converting to solar energy this time of year, but reduced panel prices and declining rebates have created a "sweet spot" for the economic benefits of going solar. Currently, 30% federal tax credits and California Solar Initiative rebates cover about half the cost of solar power systems, but state funded rebates are declining rapidly, and will not be extended when depleted. Additionally, solar contractors are typically slower during the winter and are likely to offer more competitive pricing and install systems more rapidly than in the busier summer months. Here is a list of things to investigate before going solar:

- Inspect the roof condition. Any damage will need to be replaced or repaired before installing panels. Access the amount of space with southerly exposure and minimal shading.

If sunny roof space is limited, installation of ground mounted panels may be an alternative.

- Calculate the average monthly kilowatt-hour (kWh) usage from several recent electrical bills. When sizing a system, the goal is to lower usage into the first two tiers (460 kWh) since the price of electricity for those is regulated by the state, and increases are absorbed by the third and fourth tiers. The cost of solar power systems can be reduced by thou-

sands of dollars if sized to keep billing in the first two tiers rather than covering 100% of usage. Typically home owners with electric bills over \$200 a month are the best candidates for solar power, in which case the system will pay for itself in five to seven years.

- When choosing a solar power installer, go to www.gosolar-california.ca.gov to find approved contractors in your area. The site lists the number of installations and years in operation for each company.

- Acquire quotes from at least two or three contractors for comparison and obtain the following information:

- The contractor license number, proof of liability insurance (at least \$1,000,000) and workers compensation insurance.

- Insure the contractor is well established in the solar industry. Many contractors with other types of licenses have entered the industry and have little or no experience with electricity, let alone solar power.

- Ask if the California Solar Initiative (CSI) rebate interconnection agreement paperwork will be completed. Established companies have experienced staff members specializing in this process which is time consuming and can be very confusing.

- Request to see examples of completed projects and a list of references.

- Inquire about the installation process and the timing of the project.

- Make sure qualified professionals will be completing the work. Anyone working on electrical panels must have a C-10 license (electrical contractor license) or be licensed as a California journeyman electrician. Many solar contractors use unqualified employees who are paid sub-standard rates.

- Ask for specification sheets on the equipment. Most solar panels are catego-

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rized as polycrystalline and are made from a mosaic of silicone cells. They are slightly less efficient and less expensive than monocrystalline panels, which are made from a single silicone cell and give the maximum amount of power per square inch. CSI rebates require a 25-year performance warranty for panels and a 10-year warranty for inverters and installation.

- Request quotes for two or three different sized systems, then decide what will work best for you.

Once the decision has been made, be sure to read the contract thoroughly and understand the payment terms. By law, a contractor can ask for an initial deposit of no more than a \$1,000 or 10% of the contract price (whichever is less).

Going solar can be an excellent investment for the future if a little effort is put into the process. Not only does solar power make sense economically, but homeowners who make the switch to renewable solar energy from electricity generated by fossil fuel are actually converting their home to an eco-friendly power generating station.☺

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