

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Can I Afford Solar?

Dear EcoGirl: I'd love to add solar to my home for the New Year. Is that reasonable with my tight finances? *Signed, Dreaming in Graton*

Dear Dreaming: Thanks for caring enough to consider solar. The good news is that solar is not only smart for the planet — it can be smart for your wallet too. How great is that?

Nine Reasons Solar Can Make Financial Sense

1) You might actually lower your monthly expenses. If you now spend at least \$75 a month on electricity, you'll likely break even or save money with solar.

2) You can get a loan for solar, so you don't need up-front capital.

3) You'll be converting a current expense into an investment. Why not take what you're already paying PG&E for electricity and invest it in your home instead? Then you'll have a solar system to show for your payments, not just cancelled checks.

4) You'll increase your home's resale value, often by as much as your system cost (not true for all improvement projects).

5) You won't increase your property tax value. California exempts solar photovoltaic (PV) systems. It's the best of both worlds!

6) You'll be taking advantage of current incentives that significantly reduce your system cost, including California rebates, federal tax credits, loan interest deductions, and (sometimes) time-of-use metering.

Important: Rebates are ratcheting lower over time and credits are subject to political whims, so it's smart to use these while you can.

7) You'll watch your savings grow each year, as your energy costs stay fixed while PG&E's rates likely increase.

8) You'll reduce your vulnerability to sudden price increases and energy supply interruptions caused by political unrest, weather disasters, and peak oil.

9) You'll help protect our shared economic base. Our economy (and thus everyone's finances) depends on reliable energy sources and healthy ecosystems. To safeguard both, and avert serious crises, our culture needs to rapidly shift away from polluting fossil fuels. By buying solar, you're providing citizen leadership for this vital transition.

BONUS BENEFITS! With solar, you'll also contribute to Sonoma County's inspiring targets for greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions. (See <www.climateprotectioncampaign.org>.) Plus you'll eco-impress your friends and neighbors!

Making Your Solar Plan

So does solar make sense in your situation? To find out, identify your current electricity usage and your site's solar potential. Also explore ways to improve your home's energy efficiency, to save money immediately and reduce your solar system needs.

Here are some great resources to help you determine your specifics.

• **Estimated costs and paybacks.** Enter your present electrical usage at <www.findsolar.com> (click on "My Solar Estimator"). In return, you'll get a ballpark calculation of your solar system size, cost, rebates, and paybacks in both money and GHG reductions. It's exciting to see the possibilities!

• **Local solar vendors.** For a more specific assessment, many solar companies offer a free on-site evaluation that identifies your solar capacity, suggests conservation measures, and estimates system costs. Their websites can also offer useful information about solar energy, system options, financial aspects, and more. To find local vendors, go to <www.findsolar.com> or search online for "solar" plus your town's name.

• **Solar Sonoma County.** This group's website offers a list of local vendors (with links) plus an energy efficiency checklist and installer selection tips. They also hold public educational

events. <www.solarssonomacounty.com> 823-1153. Vendors are at <www.solarssonomacounty.com/solarbus.html>

• **Bank loans.** Because of your existing relationship, it's often simplest to start by asking your mortgage bank about financing options. Some banks offer special loans for solar and conservation, based on projected energy savings and the added value to your home. Also check out SCEIP's innovative county government financing at <www.sonomacountyenergy.org> or call 521-6200.

• **Doing it yourself.** Experienced handyfolk can get help from books (such as *The People's Guide to Basic Solar Power* <www.powerfromsun.com>) or an installer willing to advise (such as Nick Carter of npc Solar).

• **Learning more.** Further detailed information is at <www.gosolarnow.com>. Also see PG&E's site, <www.pge.com>. After choosing "Home," click on "Save Energy and Money" then "Solar Energy." Solar pioneer Real Goods offers solar systems and gadgets through <www.realgoods.com>. For current industry information, including ways to encourage eco-wise state and federal actions, see <www.seia.org>.

And so, there it is, your path to discovering if solar can indeed be for you what it's been for many others — an affordable dream come true!

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter.

Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl believes that everyone can be a superhero for the planet. Then she shows you how!"

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