



Go solar without rooftop panels

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As the winter of 2019 bore down on the upstate New York suburb of Guilderland, Mary Anne Bettcker, 65, got a curious letter in the mail. A company named Arcadia was pitching solar power -- not from her roof, but from an unspecified "new community solar project."

One of the things that struck Bettcker as odd was that Arcadia was a long way from her community. It was based halfway across the country, in Tulsa, Okla. To sweeten the deal, the company's letter offered a \$75 gift card, as well as a 5% discount on Bettcker's electric bill.

Though the letter seemed far-fetched to Bettcker, a school nurse, she likes solar power as a concept. "There are people in my neighborhood who have started putting solar panels on their house," she says, "so there must be something to it."

There must be. A recent survey by Pew Research Center finds more homeowners are considering solar. Most are citing either concern for the environment, the prospect of lower utility bills or both.

While Pew found that just 6% of U.S. homeowners have installed solar panels at home, another 46% say they've given serious thought to adding them in the past year. That's up from 40% just three years prior, with the biggest spike in interest in the South Atlantic states, from Delaware to Florida.

But solar is even getting traction in places like upstate New York, which is notoriously cloudy. The Albany area, where Bettcker and her husband live, averages just 182 sunny days per year, well below the U.S. average of 205.

"It was a challenge," Rice recalls. "It took me about a year to do all the legwork that's behind this project -- a lot of research and paperwork." Rice estimates it'll take 12 to 15 years for the project to pay for itself.

To fill that gap, organizations have emerged pitching opportunities for residents to share in the electrons produced by nearby medium-scale solar farms. Logically enough, this energy distribution system is called "community solar" or more specifically, "shared solar." (Bettcker's letter came from one of these companies.)

"We're seeing community solar growing all over the country," says Rick Umoff, a policy and market development director with the Solar Energy Industries Association. "It's become a very popular offering."

With shared solar, you're essentially claiming a piece of the output from a specific solar farm, with the promise of knocking 5% or 10% off your electric bill. With more choice, however, invariably comes more confusion.



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As states begin to permit shared-solar arrangements, an array of different models has emerged. Some sharing arrangements, especially in the Southeast, are offered directly by local utilities. But there is also a surge of third-party players in the mix. These companies offer discounts directly to customers, using state-approved tax credits for solar development.

Sometimes, that means getting two bills each month: one from your local utility and another from the shared-solar provider. At the end of the year, you end up paying less overall for electricity. But adding another bill to the stack can be a bit of a hassle.

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