

State Solar Program Spotlight *Solarize Portland*

This case study is part of a series prepared by Clean Energy Group for the Department of Energy's Solar State Technical Outreach Partnership Project. This and other case studies of innovative state solar programs can be found on the States Advancing Solar website at www.statesadvancingsolar.org.

State Solar Spotlight: March 2010



Solarize Portland

[solarize portland](#)



The [Energy Trust of Oregon](#), a nonprofit public purpose organization dedicated to energy efficiency and renewable energy development, is partnering with the City of Portland and local neighborhood coalitions to offer residents of Portland a unique group purchasing mechanism for installing solar electric systems in their communities. [Solarize Portland](#) is an innovative program that helps residents overcome the financial and logistical hurdles of going solar. The project featured a single installer selected through a competitive process; a low, set price for participants; community-led marketing and outreach; educational workshops and a limited enrollment period. The effort was an unprecedented success, resulting in 120 new, home photovoltaic systems in five months, more than three times the number of systems installed in the city of Portland in 2008.

Energy Trust has been working for years to address the financial and policy barriers homeowners encounter when they start down the path to solar. The organization has developed several successful marketing strategies to make it easier for home and business owners to go solar in Oregon. However, *Solarize Portland* was a unique opportunity to roll community building and education, smart marketing, green job creation, and economies of scale into a single package. "It was a true triple bottom line success. You don't get those very often," says Lizzie Rubado, senior solar project manager, Energy Trust. *Solarize Portland* tackled the primary market barriers for homeowners looking to go solar: upfront cost, discomfort with contractors and the sales process, unfamiliarity with solar technology, financial complexity, and inertia. Above all, it was designed to be simple to engage and enroll in, featuring:

- Grassroots outreach and promotion by neighborhood volunteers
- Competitively selected contractor with set pricing tiers
- Educational workshops

- Free site assessments for all enrollees to determine suitability
- Incentives of \$2.25/watt, plus state and federal tax credits
- Limited-time enrollment period

Though known up-front, pricing for *Solarize Portland* depended on the volume of participation from the community. It ranged from \$7.20/watt for very little participation, down to \$6.80/watt for more than 150 kilowatts of cumulatively installed capacity. However, enrollment in Solarize Portland was so fast that it became apparent early on that the price for all participants would be \$6.80/watt—29 percent less than the average price in Portland at the time.

\$19,040	Initial Price
-\$6,300	Energy Trust incentive (\$2.25/watt)
-\$6,000	Oregon state tax credit (\$3/watt, \$6,000 cap)
-\$3,822	Federal tax credit (30% of \$12,740)
\$2,918	Final out-of-pocket cost

Courtesy of Energy Trust of Oregon

Critical to the success of *Solarize Portland* was the collaboration of Energy Trust, a statewide nonprofit organization with deep solar expertise and market familiarity, with Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Coalition (SE Uplift), a local nonprofit experienced in engaging citizens and implementing community projects. The project design made the most of each organization's strengths and credibility with homeowners. Outreach was led by SE Uplift and a corps of dedicated volunteers from five of its neighborhoods. In addition, a project website was created at www.solarizeportland.org. This website, which was written and maintained by a neighborhood volunteer, became the central resource for information about the project as it progressed.

Workshops

To make it easy for homeowners to get up to speed, *Solarize Portland* delivered a series of educational workshops. All interested neighbors were strongly encouraged to attend one of five introductory, one-hour seminars, held in each of the neighborhoods that were actively recruiting participants. These seminars were a *Solarize Portland* crash course, explaining how the project worked, the benefits of buying in bulk, how to participate and a brief introduction to solar. After attending an introductory workshop, those who wanted additional, in-depth information were also invited to attend Q&A sessions held after business hours, three weeks in a row. These informal, open-format sessions covered different topic areas, including incentives, tax credits and financing; technical nuts and bolts; and net metering.

Results

The original goal was to enroll 50 homeowners and achieve 25 installations through the effort. *Solarize Portland* and its unique and successful melding of community activism, education and bulk purchasing, enrolled more than 300 homes in six weeks. In the end, 120 residential solar electric systems were installed in six months—more than triple the 38 installations completed on homes citywide in 2008. The 120 installations added 350 kilowatts of new PV capacity to Portland, and will produce an estimated 359,000 kWh of electricity per year. The project also helped provide 18 professional wage jobs for site assessors, engineers, project managers, journeyman electricians, and roofers.



Google map of the Solarize Portland installations in Portland, Oregon. Courtesy of Imagine Energy.

The concept has grown into a winning model that is spreading quickly to other neighborhoods in Portland and beyond. The City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability is helping other neighborhood organizations to take *Solarize Portland* citywide. Thanks to their support, *Solarize* projects are gearing up now in both Northeast and Southwest Portland, with goals forecasting another 500+ installations in 2010. Meanwhile, Pendleton, a rural city in northeastern Oregon, will launch its community bulk-purchasing project in late March of 2010.

Lessons learned and recommendations for other organizations

- **Plan for success:** People love a good deal. Expect high levels of interest.
- **Collaborate with a trusted, local organization:** Let them take center stage as much as possible. They know how to talk to their constituents. You'll also be laying the groundwork for an organization filled with solar-savvy advocates.
- **Consider multiple installers:** If you are targeting a community with the potential to secure more than 50 installations, select more than one contractor. Creating a queue of enthusiastic neighbors that then have to wait to be served can kill the buzz. Serving them immediately will increase the likelihood that they will install.
- **Keep it focused:** Define your participation area to limit the scope of your effort and keep it cost effective for your installer.
- **Start early and give yourself time:** Select your contractor(s) before beginning your outreach so you have answers to all your questions ahead of time. This also gives the contractor time to wrap up projects with previous clients.
- **Keep it simple:** Avoid creating options for people. Each decision increases the chance that you'll lose them along the way.
- **Don't get disheartened with dissenters:** This isn't for everyone. Some people will object to the lack of choices. Connect them to the standard offer.
- **Don't be afraid to talk money:** Consumers are hungry for comparative cost statistics. Being transparent speeds decision-making.
- **Beg, borrow or steal a dedicated project manager:** There will be lots of responsibilities to juggle and you need a single point of contact for fielding inquiries.
- **Use an online sign-up:** Preferably one connected to a database. You will save yourself a lot of work.

"This project has truly brought our community together, all moving toward one goal," said Tim O'Neal, sustainability coordinator, SE Uplift. "From attending workshops to watching as neighbors went solar street by street — it's been great to see what we've been able to accomplish as a group."

Special thanks to Lizzie Rubado of the Energy Trust of Oregon for her assistance in preparing this Solar Spotlight.

This program summary and other [State Solar Spotlight Program](#) case studies can be found on this website under [State Activities](#).