

Solar Power – An Investment Whose Time has Arrived

by Peter A. Roos

If you have been anxiously waiting, as we were, for the time to arrive when solar electric power was an affordable alternative, you need wait no longer.

The falling cost of solar panels, the increasing cost of electrical power and the paltry returns being realized on investments in general have suddenly made returns from an investment in solar power look pretty exciting.

If you haven't already looked at your insulation levels, energy-saving appliances, including a high-efficiency air conditioner, it may be time to consider this as well. If you have investment money sitting in a low-interest-bearing savings account, or a CD, and a south facing roof you could mount solar panels on, you can likely improve your return right away by investing in a solar system. The size of the system you'll want depends on your average monthly power bill.

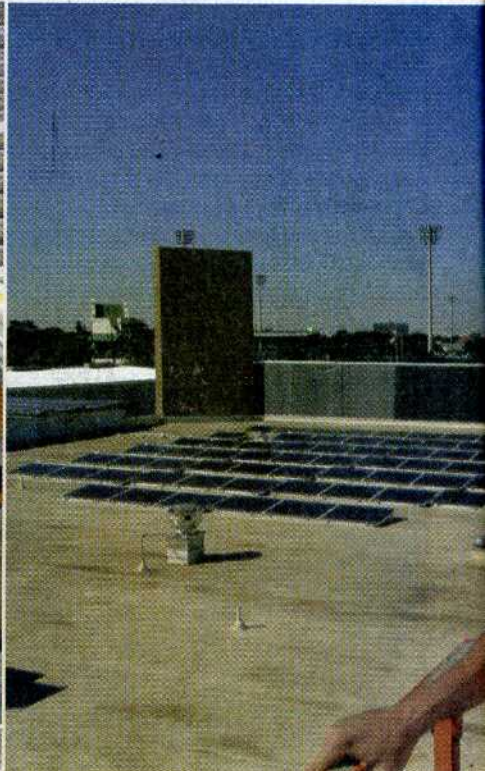
A 5 kilowatt (5,000 watt) system will likely produce enough power to eliminate a \$160 per month bill, producing an "income" stream of \$2,000 per year. Such a system, which likely could be installed for around \$20,000 would offer a 10% cash on cash return on investment. If you pay federal income taxes, there is a 30% federal tax credit applicable for alternative energy and certain energy

-saving investments through 2016.

That is a direct reduction of income tax due, which can be taken the first year if you would otherwise owe that much income tax, or it can be used for a number of years.

Assuming you can benefit from the credit, your net investment goes down to \$14,000 after the tax credit, making your \$2,000 per year income a 14%+ return on investment. Realizing that the cost of electric power from the utility is likely to increase steadily in the future, the actual return from becoming your own energy producer can only increase in the future. If your neighbors power bill goes up 50%, your return on investment increases an equal amount.

Once you decide that an investment in solar might make sense for you, you will need to identify a solar contractor to use for your project. There are a handful of solar providers that have been in the industry for decades. These folks have the experience, they know the pitfalls, the regulations and sources of the dependable components. There are also a host of newer firms – make sure you select one that is licensed and has the knowledge



and experience to complete your project.

Solar Direct, for example, was founded in 1986 by Kirk Maust and Dale Gulden. Maust had graduated in 1981 with one of the country's first degrees in solar and renewable technology from Pennsylvania State University's Department of Mechanical and Nuclear Engineering. Gulden, President and Director of Marketing, brought sales experience in the solar industry to the table.

Maust got excited about a solar engineering career in college. "During orientation for my Business Management degree, the college presented a new Solar Energy degree program." He jumped in. He'd worked with his dad wiring houses and building mechanical things; Florida was a great escape from the Pennsylvania cold and a great place for solar engineering. "I have grown to love my career and the impact of my business on people and our planet; it feels good to give back and to make a difference."

Early on, he engineered inventive solutions for applications in the emerging geothermal, indoor air quality and energy management fields. He also built and

launched a website with an electronic shopping cart – one of the first e-commerce initiatives in the early days of the Internet. As CEO and Senior Engineer, Maust holds a Florida State Certified Solar License, is a member and former officer of the Florida Solar Energy Industry Association. He is North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) Certified for Solar Thermal and Solar Photovoltaic (PV) – the first one in Florida and one of only six in the State to get both certifications.

With a product line of over 300 Eco-friendly products, Solar Direct's primary market is e-commerce sales of DIY products throughout the entire United States. "Many of our products are DIY, so we handle the sale and shipment and the homeowner or their contractor does the installation," said Maust. "Larger projects are handled by our licensed installers."

The company is currently expanding with a national installer network and expansion into larger projects within the U.S., such as 100 Kilowatt to megawatt PV, commercial solar pool and solar

water heating installations. Maust notes, "Solar electric is very popular now due to its trendiness and 'glamour' appeal, but solar water heating is gaining ground due to its superior economic payback."

Along with the global expansion, Solar Direct has also initiated a new focus on serving Sarasota, Manatee, Hillsborough and Pinellas County markets with installation services. "We really want to emphasize our roots," Maust said. Their e-commerce business currently provides about 70 percent of the company's total revenue; the new installation initiative hopes to increase revenue share to 50%. Marketing plans include outreach to consumers, homeowners, commercial and government projects, and online and contractor resellers.

Solar Direct's products include solar pool and spa heating (Vortex is their primary brand and best seller), solar water heating, solar PV electric, solar pool pumps, solar air conditioning, solar attic ventilation, geothermal and insulation.

Corporate offices and a 10,000 square foot warehouse are in Sarasota.



The roof of the Hampton Inn & Suites, Sarasota, FL

