



# CONSIDERING SOLAR?

## Act Now!

by Suzi Harkola

Florida lags behind many in supporting financial assistance to families and businesses seeking to take advantage of solar energy, yet there is still hope that the state can gain back its moniker as the "Sunshine State."

**W**hile there are no longer any State-supported financial incentives, the Florida Public Service Commission has mandated energy providers such as Florida Power & Light, Duke, TECO, Gulf Power and smaller utility companies to offer incentives or rebates for solar installations. Those incentives were part of a pilot program and, while renewal is possible, they are scheduled to end in October 2013. And even without them, solar is gaining ground as the preferred source of power.

Kirk Maust, CEO of Sarasota-based Solar Direct, explained the rationale for consumers to switch to solar. Beyond the environmental benefits, the return

on investment is substantial. While rebates are available, he was quick to note that most are gone "in the blink of an eye." Even without monetary incentives, the cost of going solar is markedly less than even five years ago. "It was almost free-falling," he explained. "In 2008 we were looking at an installation cost of \$10 per watt; now we're down to about \$3 to \$4 per watt. We expect that this downward trend has stabilized, and there's even a possibility that the costs could rise slightly in the near term." Overall the industry projects costs to decrease slowly over the next five years as soft costs like permitting and marketing become lower with more public awareness.

**Some of the applications for both residences and businesses to access solar-installation rebates include:**

1. Solar Water Heating - he explained that this category has always been funded, and that the funds don't run out. "They're available today, at \$1,000 per home system through October 2014; more for commercial systems. This covers 20% to 25% of the cost, and then there's an additional 30% Tax Credit. This investment has a 25%APR Return on Investment (ROI) with a three to five-year payback from savings, all tax-free."
2. Solar Electric - the rebate is between \$2,000 and \$20,000. Maust says that FP&L releases money in early to mid-October. "The same 30% Tax Credit is offered," he said, "as well as a sales tax exemption saving an additional 6% to 7%, and with the new state law, there is no additional assessment on property tax. With an average cost of about \$30,000, the payback is three to six years and the ROI is up to 70%. To get this

rebate requires planning; you need to select a contractor in advance of October."

3. Solar Water Heating for low income family housing construction - most of these funds go to Habitat for Humanity projects, which Solar Direct works with directly.

With the end of the rebate program approaching in October, now is the best time to get in on a great deal. "It's like a Lotto," Dale Gulden, President of Solar Direct says, "Not everyone gets approved. We happen to enjoy a very high success rate for our clients that apply, last year it hit 100%. We can't guarantee that of course, but our attention to detail and experienced team lends itself to a very efficient process of completing high quality installations, including getting the most incentives possible."

Even if you are not one of the lucky ones to get a rebate, solar is a great investment. Consumers still get a 30% Tax Credit that's effective until 2016. Payback is still only 8 to 11 years with an impressive 15% ROI; there are not too many places you can invest your money with that kind of return. Property value is enhanced and, as Maust notes, "people can become their own utility company, fixing their cost of power for 30 years or more." Additionally, Solar Direct has other manufacture rewards and incentives available.

**For businesses, the benefits are lower bills, accelerated depreciation and the bragging rights to being a "green" business.**

### Coming to a Town Near You

A new program, funded by private banks and industry, has entered the picture to support the five-year-old PACE (Property Assessed Clean Energy) program. PACE met some roadblocks by mortgage giants Fannie May and Freddie Mac when it was first introduced, so federal funds are not available. "Now that private money is there," Maust said, "the program is getting off

the ground. The funding source leading the field is YGRENE, introduced to consumers in California. They've now expanded into seven cities around the Miami area and are looking to grow into Lee, Charlotte, Sarasota and Manatee Counties next. Other providers have also started programs in Florida. With low interest rates (6% to 8%) for homeowners and businesses that own their property, and payments spread over 20 years, it's a great deal. Because the property secures the loan - they will finance your investment in solar." He encourages consumers to contact local officials to get behind this movement.

### The Cost of Doing Nothing

"For Floridians, it is now possible to 'go solar' and pay less than the utility company's rate for power," Gulden stated. "System investments are so low that most average homeowners can afford it. It is now actually possible to have a Net Zero electric bill. Waiting for a rebate or lower prices doesn't make sense anymore. The cost of doing nothing means you will spend over \$80,000 in 30 years to the electric company. So, if you are considering solar, act now."

Solar Direct, founded in 1986 by Maust and Gulden, was a pioneering company in the solar energy industry. Maust holds a Florida State Certified Solar License and a North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners "Solar Thermal" and "Solar Photovoltaics" Certification - the first person in Florida to obtain both.

The corporate office and warehouse housing more than 350 eco-friendly products is 100% solar-powered. Some of their products include solar pool and spa heating, solar water heating, solar electric PV, solar pool pumps, solar air conditioning, solar attic ventilation and insulation. The company serves customers nationwide, but continues to focus on Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte Counties locally.

*Solar Direct is licensed by Florida as Certified Solar Contractor, Certified Electrical Contractor, Certified Commercial Pool and Spa Contractor, Engineering Certificate of Authority and Professional Engineer. Located at 6935 15th Street East, Suite 120, in Sarasota, call 800-333-9276 or visit their website, [solar-direct.com](http://solar-direct.com).*

## Solar Power FAQs

### How will the system hold up in a hurricane?

Systems can be mounted on rooftops or ground racks. The mounting hardware can be designed to withstand 180 mph winds.

### Will my system work during a power outage?

The standard system has a grid tie inverter. If the power goes out, the inverter shuts down, preventing any power from back feeding into the grid for safety. However, batteries can be added to the system to support a backup power source over an extended period of power outage.

### How long will my panels last?

Solar panels have a 25-year warranty and will produce energy for 30-40 years.

### What kind of maintenance is required?

Dust on the panels may cause a small loss in efficiency. The panels may need to be hosed down if it has not rained for a long time. Otherwise, the maintenance is minimal.

### What type of roof is required?

Photovoltaic panels can be installed on shingle, metal and tile roofs. If the roof is in need of repair or aged, replace it first, as panels must be removed to replace/repair the roof.