

Going Green with Solar Power

by Ellen Meister

Like most Long Island women, Regina Diehl was balancing a tight household budget. With two kids, a dog, monthly bills, and a recently renovated home, there wasn't any extra cash to throw around. So when her electrician husband, Mike, came home one day and announced that they were going to install a solar energy system in their house, she resisted. "That's a lot of money to lay out," she said. "And I was hoping we could save for a new front stoop."

But her husband's enthusiasm couldn't be dampened. One of their neighbors had just installed solar panels and had asked Mike to do the electrical wiring. After he was finished and saw the home's electrical meter actually running backwards, he was sold.

He asked Regina to guess how much it would reduce their electric bill, and she shrugged.

"One-hundred percent," he explained. "Our electric bill will be zero."

Regina thought hard about that. They had just put a second story onto their home, and their electric bill had doubled. She realized how much easier it would be to meet their monthly nut without sending all that money to LIPA.

Still, she was hesitant. It was a big step. So she and Mike sat down at the kitchen table and worked out the numbers, pricing the system with estimates of their energy usage and rebate programs.

"Within three years," he said, "we'll save enough for a new front stoop and a patio."

Regina fingered the solar powered calculator they had been using. She knew that solar electricity for their home would work in the same way—by converting light into energy. But she needed to know more.

Over the next few days she did her own research, and learned that the solar panels her husband wanted to install on the roof are thin layers of silicon that absorb light and convert it into electricity. The panels would be connected right to the home's circuit breaker panel, providing electricity 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with no interruption of service. Day, night, rain, shine—it didn't matter. Their home would still be connected to the electrical grid and would always have power. She also learned that the solar panels would sometimes produce more energy than they needed to run the house, which meant that they would be selling electricity to LIPA and then buying it back when they needed

it. In the spring, for instance, they would produce far more energy than they could use. But in the summer—when they ran their air conditioner as well as the pool

filter—they would buy some energy back. It would all be seamless and convenient. And the solar panels Mike wanted to buy were guaranteed for twenty-five years and required no maintenance.

"The more I thought about it," Regina told Long Island Woman, "the more sense it made. Besides, it felt like the responsible thing to do—not just financially, but environmentally."

Solar energy is, in fact, a completely clean source of energy. It uses no fossil fuels and does not produce waste or cause pollution. Depending upon the size of the system, installing solar energy in your home can have the same impact on the planet as planting five acres of trees.

"The kids were thrilled by the idea," she said. "They're so environmentally conscious. It's something they talked about all the time at school. So the notion of being one of the first families in the neighborhood to take such an earth-friendly step made them burst with pride."

Regina said she wasn't concerned about the aesthetics of putting solar panels on the new roof of their home. "Some people believe a roof has to look traditional to be beautiful, but I think that notion is changing. Even the pickiest homeowners are starting to understand the value of solar energy. It's even becoming a badge of pride for environmentally conscious Long Islanders—like having a Prius in your driveway."

Eventually, Regina told Mike she was on board one-hundred percent. That was in 2003, and after installing the system and seeing how well it worked, Mike's enthusiasm multiplied. He quickly became such a solar power enthusiast that he reinvented his company, Can-tiague Electric, as a pioneer in solar energy installations. Ten years later he is still helping Long Island homeowners harness the power of the sun.

From Regina's point of view, installing solar energy is one of the best decisions they ever made. "It's added tremendous value to the home," she said. "But living green has also added value to our lives."

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A Long Island mother of two talks about her decision to install a solar energy system.

Is Solar Energy Right for You?

Almost all Long Island homes are suitable for solar energy systems. The first step is to contact several reliable local contractors for estimates. Make sure they are NABCEP (North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners) certified. Ask each contractor to give you an estimate based on your energy use and sun path calculation. The evaluation should include all available tax and LIPA rebates. You can find more information at the following websites:

liseia.org This is the Long Island Solar Energy Industries Association website. Follow the links for information on solar energy and for finding a "blue ribbon" contractor in your area.

nabcep.org The North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners offers certification and certificate programs to renewable energy professionals throughout North America.

nyseia.org The New York Solar Energy Industries Association is a statewide non-profit membership and trade association dedicated solely to advancing the solar energy industry in our state.

SunshinelFree.org Run by Renewable Energy Long Island (reLI), this website has solar power information specific to our region.