
Department of Energy

‘Neighborhood in a park’ harnesses the sun

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The Minneapolis neighborhood of Bryn Mawr is already a “green” neighborhood in a sense. Called a “neighborhood within a park,” the diverse, middle-class enclave borders on four parks, including the city’s 759-acre flagship Theodore Wirth Park.

Over the summer, however, the Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Association (BMNA) launched a program intended to add more metaphorical greenness. Through its Bryn Mawr Solar Program, it’s granting \$1,000 to \$3,000 to residents and businesses installing solar photovoltaic panels or hot water heaters.

Andrew Kraling, a co-representative for his area of the neighborhood, said it was a good fit for Bryn Mawr. The association had succeeded with ecologically friendly programs in the past, including neighborhood participation in a car share, a rain garden and a door-to-door offer of energy audits that netted close to 100 homes.

“It’s an area of the city where people are energy minded and environmentally minded,” says Kraling, who also runs a real estate agency in the neighborhood. “You’ll see people

put money behind the talk. We probably had a dozen houses already that had solar systems.”

Revitalizing with solar

The program came about after the BMNA received \$40,000 in city Neighborhood Revitalization Program funds. The association asked its members to think of ways to use the money. Solar grants rang a bell with Kraling because he’d looked into leasing a rooftop solar energy system for his own home. Kraling designed the program with association colleagues Scott McLaughlin and Ben Horn.

“I learned a lot. I’m not a huge expert in solar, but I have an engineering background,” he says. “The city really liked it and so did the neighborhood.”

The Bryn Mawr Solar Program is open to anyone who owns property in Bryn Mawr, including businesses, and to renters with the owner’s permission. Participants can get a \$1,000 grant to lease a solar photovoltaic system; a \$2,000 grant to install a solar thermal system; or a \$3,000 grant to install a photovoltaic system.

In addition to the funding, the association provides information about utility and tax incentives that can cut down the payback period by 50 percent or more. It also provided a list of local vendors, many of whom appeared at two informational meetings the BMNA held.

“Part of our learning experience with it is educating people that it’s feasible,” Kraling says. “[Minnesota’s] environment is still solar friendly, and that coupled with all those solar incentives can reduce your payback period on the systems quite a bit.”

‘Neighbor envy’

Thus far, eight homeowners have installed solar systems through the program, and Kraling expects more after the winter weather lifts next year. In fact, the program has been extended into 2011, with an extra \$20,000 in funding available. And Gayle Prest, manager of environmental services for the city of Minneapolis, says the city is watching the program for lessons that can be applied to solar grant projects in other neighborhoods.

With the extra planning time and the example of the neighbors who’ve already taken the plunge, Kraling believes more property owners will sign up.

“I think what’ll catch on is the neighbor envy: ‘It’s for real, it’s happening, maybe I could do that too,’” Kraling says.

What does this mean for me?

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