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Solar-electric strategies work for local businesses

Panels offer savings of both carbon, money

BY STEVE LINER
 BUSINESS MATTERS EDITOR
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Barbara Hill is passionate about renewable resources. That is one reason hers was one of the first businesses around to "go solar," but it's not the last because there's gold in those photovoltaic cells.

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You might not think downtown Tallahassee is a great place for solar panels, but it has proved so for Southern Strategy Group, said its partners. The lobbying group — which represents Florida's Solar Energy Industries Association — has found a way to generate solar power, but not on a roof shaded by the neighboring high-rise offices. Southern Strategy opted for its parking lot tucked away off Monroe Street.

In addition to an interest in environmental protection (Southern Strategy already claims reduction of its carbon footprint by 28 pounds), both companies are participants in the state rebate program. Hill's retail combo Once Upon a Child and Fashion Pointe on Maclay Commerce Boulevard got back about half the nearly \$194,000 investment in its solar power system, while Southern Strategy is just now applying for a rebate for its \$60,000 installation.

If you're interested in the rebate program, you should be prepared to act fast, officials said. The Florida Legislature passed a \$5-million appropriation for the program in the next fiscal year. If that survives the governor's veto pen, though, a backlog of 1,900 applications will eat more than \$3.3 million of the total, leaving less than \$2 million through June 30, 2010.

Hill's renewable energy passion begins with her businesses. Once Upon a Child sells both new baby equipment and clothes, as well as buying "gently used" items from customers for resale. When Hill moved the business last year, she added Fashion Pointe, an adult version.

"We're all about recycling clothes, toys, equipment," she said. "We can just about triple the life of children's things."

Hill's 25 kilowatt-hour system comes complete with an "island system" of batteries that always runs the store's cash registers, fans (to maximize cooling efficiency) and much of the store's lighting, she said. The system has the triple value of saving about \$1,000 on the monthly utility bill, reducing her business's peak demand (a continuing savings) and providing a series of federal, state and local tax advantages.



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Workers install solar-driven photovoltaic cells in the parking lot of Southern Strategy Group on North Monroe St. in Tallahassee. The system cost the lobbying firm about \$60,000, but already has reduced its carbon footprint by 28 pounds, a spokesman said. (Steve Liner/Democrat)

HOW TO SOLAR-POWER YOUR BUSINESS

- Make sure any work you have done is with a company licensed to provide the work. No license, no rebates.
- Do your homework. Make sure any system you choose is right for you and your building. Initial investments can be large. But exercise care: an online search of "solar energy" generated 15 million hits. Among places to start: www.talgov.com (a "solar" search yields places there for information, including details on 25 or so local solar-generated electricity projects) where you can download the net meter agreement.
- Do the math. Any solar system will pay back over time, but how long? Be sure to take into account tax credits, possible rebate and tax advantages. And work with your utility company to understand how peak demand rating is costing you and how much solar electricity could help, if at all.

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Paul Bradshaw, a Southern Strategy partner, said the Solar Energy Industries Association led the charge for the continuation and expansion of the rebate program, as well as reinstatement of an old pro-solar law that made improving property with solar panels exempt from increased property taxes. Both passed. He said within 30 days the group will follow the solar installations with the replacement of its aging air-conditioning system for a more efficient new one.

Saving on your utility bill requires installation of a "net meter," a program so new that, when Once Upon A Child went solar, the store's owners had to wait more than two months for the City of Tallahassee to catch up and let them connect it.

City spokeswoman Michele Bono said city utilities are now accustomed to the issue, cutting delays. She said the city's Web site now has information for consumers on the topic.

"Each unit you produce reduces your bill at the same rate we charge you for electricity," said David Byrne, Tallahassee's director of energy services.

- Contact Business Matters Editor Steve Liner at (850) 599-2238 or sliner@Tallahassee.com.

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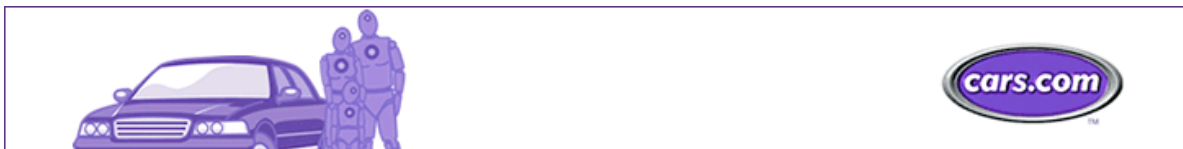
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