

Star-Telegram

Get solar panels installed for free through TXU program

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Would you like to have energy-saving solar rooftop panels installed at your home, without any upfront cost?

If so, you're an electricity consumer TXU Energy wants to reach through a new program to be formally announced today by the Irving-based retail electric provider. TXU is teaming up with a California-based company, SolarCity, to lease solar panels that will be installed for free.

For example, a 4-kilowatt solar array of about 20 panels, sufficient for a three-bedroom or four-bedroom home, would have an initial leasing cost of about \$35 per month. A homeowner paying 12 cents per kilowatt-hour might reduce a monthly electric bill by \$50 with the solar system, producing a net savings after the leasing fee, said John Geary, TXU Energy's vice president for innovation.

Lyndon Rive, CEO of SolarCity, estimated the solar panels would result in "a savings of between 15 and 20 percent" on electric bills. Rive and Geary noted that savings could vary depending on homeowners' electricity use and rate.

TXU Energy does not require that a homeowner be an electricity customer nor become one to participate in the solar-panel program, spokesman Michael Gutierrez said.

15-year lease

A lease would run for 15 years, "within the sweet spot" of the "useful life" of about 20 to 25 years for solar panels, Geary said. A homeowner who sold a residence before the lease expired could "pre-pay the balance of the lease and transfer it to the homebuyer," with the panels likely boosting the sale price, he said.

A homeowner who sold a home and bought another residence in Dallas-Fort Worth could have the panels moved to the new home, Geary said.

The residential solar arrays range from 2.3 to 10 kilowatts, with initial leasing costs running from about \$20 to \$100 monthly, Gutierrez said. The cost would increase 2.5 percent annually, Rive said, meaning an initial monthly lease of \$35 would grow to \$50.69 after 15 years.

Participants make payments to SolarCity, separate from their electric bill, Gutierrez said.

Homeowners who want to participate but prefer to buy the solar panels outright can do so. A typical 4-kilowatt system costs \$26,000, not including federal rebates and tax incentives, TXU said.

The leasing program, in effect now, serves the most heavily populated parts of D-FW.

It is being offered in an area roughly bounded by Waxahachie to the south, Joshua and Cleburne to the southwest, Weatherford to the west, Denton to the north, McKinney to the northeast and Terrell to the east, Gutierrez said.

The program drew praise Tuesday from people and organizations that often have been critical of electric utilities and Texas' deregulated system.

Praise from critics

"Well, hell's freezing over. TXU's got a great program," said Tom "Smitty" Smith, Texas director for Public Citizen. The consumer and environmental organization has unwaveringly supported expanded energy conservation and renewable energy such as solar and wind power.

"The biggest impediment to solar is upfront cost," Smith said Tuesday. TXU's program "takes away" that hurdle, he said.

"It's sort of the wave of the future, where utilities make money off providing energy *services*, instead of just electricity," he said.

"Today marks a new chapter in bringing renewable energy to Texas on a mass scale," Jim Marston, founding director of the Texas office of the Environmental Defense Fund, said in a statement praising TXU's program.

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