

# Here comes the sun: Solar power's price is now within reach

By STACY DOWNS



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Isabel Reyes and Rocky Orozco live with their daughters Ciara Reyes, 13, Olivia Orozco, 6, and Cassandra Orozco, 2, in a Kansas City, Kan., house with solar features including a solar air heater. Their home is one of several with solar features built through the Argentine Neighborhood Development Association.

2010 just might go down as the year solar energy gained mainstream acceptance.

Local stores that sell solar products are seeing major boosts in sales compared with last year, some as much as 40 percent.

The sun-powered momentum is fueled by less expensive products that are made more affordable through federal tax credits and rebates at a time when utility prices are rising.

Another contributing factor to the rising interest in renewable energy is the recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's made the masses realize the difficulty of getting fossil fuels," says

Rita Norton, a retired schoolteacher who invested in a solar panel electrical system several years ago for her Kansas City Cape Cod-style home. "More people are talking to me about solar, which is simply free energy from the sun."

The biggest hurdle with solar power is the initial cost of equipment and installation. The 12 panels for Norton's 1,400-square-foot home, which she bought before today's major incentives, were a hefty sum. Still, she finds her investment paying off.



The panels on Norton's roof convert sunlight into direct current electricity, which travels through a wire-filled conduit to batteries in the basement. Her system is connected to the city's electric grid but also can run independently with the exception of the clothes dryer (she prefers line drying anyway) and air conditioning.

"I'm a wuss when it comes to heat, so I use air conditioning," Norton said. "Last summer, my top bill was \$85. I suspect I will always have low bills (between \$30 and \$40) for taxes and service charges."

Although solar panel prices are likely to continue to decrease, not everyone can afford them. But other solar options are available.

The Argentine Neighborhood Development Association in Kansas City, Kan., recently built several affordable energy-efficient homes. Although these aren't fully solar-powered homes, they have several solar features. And they are popular.

"The houses were sold before they were finished," said Ann Brandau-Murguia, executive director of ANDA and a commissioner of Wyandotte County's Unified Government. "We liked how these features make utilities affordable for residents in the neighborhood. It's important because it's populated by people with middle to lower incomes."

Isabel Reyes, Rocky Orozco and their three daughters moved into one of the houses, a blue two-story with a wraparound porch. You have to go to the backyard to tell the house has solar features. In their case, it's a framed black panel, a solar air heater, attached to the back of the house. The panel can be mounted on the roof.

"It's attractive, almost elegant even," said Reyes, who works in nutritional services for the Kansas City, Kan., school district. "It's like a black mirror."

The heater worked well, too, Reyes said. In winter, hot air comes out two circular vents, similar to dryer vents. A thermostat can be set to blow the warm air into the house. In the summer, the vents are closed, and Reyes and Orozco conceal them with a tall houseplant.

Upstairs, they have solar daylighting tubes, which provide natural light sources from ceilings like small round skylights. "It's nice because you don't have to turn any switches on," Reyes said. "It's always as bright as it needs to be."

The house also has a solar attic vent-fan, which cools the attic and lowers the temperature in the upstairs living quarters.

Residents learned about the features in their houses at an informational meeting with the systems' installers. A common question was about the efficiency of solar on cloudy days. They learned the power still charges. "If you consider a home a car, this is a 2010 Cadillac," said Orozco, a postal service mail handler. "It's got different styling and updated functions, so occasionally you have to get out the owners manual."

Read more: <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/07/31/2111775/here-comes-the-sun-solar-power.html#ixzz0vURd546i>