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Plan unfolds for bulk buy of solar arrays in Portola Valley, Ladera

By David Boyce
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A group of Portola Valley and Ladera residents are collaborating with a solar-panel installer on a plan to increase the level of sun-generated electricity in these communities. The plan calls for acquiring solar electricity systems at a discount by buying in bulk.

Representatives of Foster City-based Solar City will fan out to visit each home in Portola Valley and Ladera, starting early this week, to engage in an "advertising, public relations and education" campaign on solar electricity fundamentals and to determine whether a solar panel would work out at a given home, said company president and chief executive officer Lyndon Rive.

The company needs to sign up 40 to 50 residents before the end of the year to make the plan work economically. Mr. Rive and other members of the Solar City team met with a residents' committee at the home of Councilman Ted Driscoll on Oct. 29 to talk about plans for the outreach campaign.

Mr. Driscoll recently had a solar electricity system installed on his roof. Portola Valley officials are enthusiastic about wider use of solar panels, but the town is not affiliated with this project and will have no role in choosing a vendor, Mr. Driscoll said.

The committee will choose a vendor, probably on Nov. 14. Vendors other than Solar City

■ INFORMATION

For more information on this program, send e-mail to edgy@sbcglobal.net.

are welcome to make offers, but none has responded so far, said Armand Neukermans, a committee member and one of the people behind the plan.

"It's sort of like planting a tree for generations to come," Mr. Neukermans said of the proposal. Commenting darkly on the need

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ARMAND NEUKERMANS,
PORTOLA VALLEY RESIDENT

for clean energy in the face of global environmental troubles, Mr. Neukermans added: "We don't have 30 years. Our kids don't have 30 years."

Setting an example

The state's rebate for installing solar panel systems drops in January to \$2.40 per watt from \$2.60 per watt. To make the current plan work, Solar City — formerly the solar-panel business unit at Palo Alto Hardware — must install a total capacity of at least 175 kilowatts, Mr. Rive said in an interview.

"We're trying to set up an example so that, if this community can move over (to solar),

we'll get other communities to move over," Mr. Rive said. "If we succeed, I think this is going to be quite big ... in setting an example that communities can change if they come together."

A home with an \$85 monthly electricity bill would require a 3.5-kilowatt array, while a home with a \$1,000 bill would need 18 kilowatts, he said. Most homes have the necessary free space on the roof, he added.

The arrays would be sized to produce just enough electricity to meet a home's normal requirements, Mr. Rive said. There is no financial incentive in generating more than that because, while the excess is fed back to PG&E, residents receive nothing for it, he said.

If a roof is oriented away from the sun's path, the system can be set at a slight angle, or installed on the ground at an added charge, Mr. Rive said. For properties with deep shade from large trees, solar panels may be uneconomical, he added.

Residents who sign with Solar City would save about 30 percent on purchase and installation of the panels, Mr. Rive said. The deal includes handling of permits, rebates and PG&E connections. Solar City will also monitor the system's operation over the Internet, he said.

Plans for the new Town Center include up to 70 kilowatts of roof-mounted solar panels. The town could sign up with Solar City if a down payment could be made before the end of the year, said Councilman Ted Driscoll. ■