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CATCHING SOME RAYS: Local couple hooks up to sun's energy

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Photos



This photovoltaic solar panel system at Peter and Barbara Brinkley's home in Jay went online about three weeks ago. A tracking system lets the panel follow the sun's movements across the sky, increasing the panel's productivity.
Heather Sackett/Lake Placid News

JAY — Peter and Barbara Brinkley's Adirondack home looks no different than most — cedar frame, a cozy fireplace inside, a bird feeder and birch trees in the yard. Except for one thing: A roughly 25-foot-tall solar panel array stands in the front yard, quietly powering the Brinkley's home.

Last year they became the first people to apply for and receive a permit from the town of Jay to install a residential photovoltaic system. The system went online about three weeks ago, nine months after the Brinkleys first started planning for it.

This system, which Peter calls state of the art, has an interesting feature that helps it capture the sun's rays more efficiently. At noon on the dot, the panel moved to align itself with the sun. The move was slow, quiet and almost imperceptible. Nearby, chickadees seemed oblivious to the panel tilting back.

"It's just like it's reclining in an Adirondack chair. I love it," Barbara said.

The panel tracks the sun's movement throughout the day, adjusting every hour on the hour. At 10 p.m. it returns to its original east-facing position to be ready to capture the next day's sunrise. The tracker's maker, Triangle Electrical Systems, of Plattsburgh, will soon be reprogramming the system to move every half hour with the sun, with the goal of eventually having the panel move very slowly and continuously throughout the day.

The ability to track the sun increases the system's productivity exponentially, Peter explained.

"The panel is very sensitive," he said. "A cloud will go over and it will drop 1,000 watts just like that."

A small electronic box shows how much energy the system is producing and the information is sent to Peter's computer inside the house, so he can see how well it's working. The system is connected to the electrical grid and when the panel is not producing enough energy to power the house, the Brinkleys draw power from New York State Electric and Gas. When daytime production is at its peak, the system feeds power back into the grid and the Brinkleys get a credit against their kilowatt hour use.

The Brinkleys have lived in the Adirondacks fulltime since 2004 but have been making the trek up from New York City for many years before that. Barbara is from Lake Placid and attended school here until the ninth grade. When the Brinkleys moved into Barbara's mother's nearly 50-year-old, drafty house in Jay, they realized they would have to make some changes if they were going to live there.

"Her energy bills were frightful," Barbara said. "We went on a tear to be energy efficient."

The Brinkleys started small with replacing the old furnace. The money and energy they saved on heat was enough of an incentive to keep them pushing ahead with more renovations and upgrades. But economics wasn't the only thing that inspired them to make changes in the way they live. The Brinkleys like using technology to return to a simpler way of life.

"We love the Park," Barbara said. "I just got really excited about being a part of the solution instead of a part of the problem."

Peter knows just how closely energy consumption is tied to the health of the Park. He just finished six years as the president of the board of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. The couple also drives a hybrid vehicle.

"We think we are transitioning into a different world," Peter said. "We try to walk the talk."

The Brinkleys won't know how much money they have saved until one year from now when they can compare a year's worth of energy consumption, but the system is designed to produce 90 percent of the couple's electricity use. The moment of truth comes in another week or so when they receive their first electric bill since they've been using the solar panel.

Peter wouldn't say how much the system cost him initially, but he admitted going solar isn't financially feasible for everyone in the North Country. He is confident, however, that just like iPods, cell phones and digital cameras, as more people buy the technology, the more affordable (and smaller and sophisticated) it will become.

A worker at Sun Power in San Jose, Calif., where the Brinkleys purchased their system, said a typical system can run anywhere from \$20 to \$40,000, depending on the home's power needs.

"It's a long-term pay out," he said. "But it will become more and more accessible as time goes by."

State and federal governments are now giving energy tax credits and other incentives for residential renewable energy. For more information, go to www.dsireusa.org and www.nyserda.org.

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