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CASE STUDY: CITY-LED SOLARIZATION IN BEAVERTON, OR

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INTRODUCTION

Solar Beaverton is a community, bulk-purchase solar program led by the City of Beaverton's Sustainability Division. Through a fixed price cost negotiated by the City with a selected solar vendor, the innovative program made a residential solar system far less expensive for homeowners, and lessened the complexity and risk in the process as well. Since the solar vendor performs the bulk of program marketing and administration, the City spent very little money on Solar Beaverton.



Beaverton Mayor Denny Doyle

After its first year of full operation following a pilot program, Solar Beaverton was widely hailed as a success and garnered national recognition, including Mayor Denny Doyle's receiving a U.S. Conference of Mayors' Climate Protection Award. Read on for details on how the program works, what it has accomplished, and tips and lessons learned for other local governments looking to replicate this program, including how the City created its RFP.

ABOUT BEAVERTON, OR

Beaverton is Oregon's sixth largest city with a population of 89,803. It is located seven miles west of Portland in Washington County. Beaverton has been recognized for its quality of life and environmental accomplishments: It was one of just four cities of its size recently recognized as a "Smarter City" energy leader by the Natural Resources Defense Council, and in 2012 was named one of the 100 Best Places to Live in America by *Money* magazine. The City has set a goal to decrease greenhouse gas emissions from city operations by 20 percent from 2008 levels by 2020 and by 2050 to reduce GHG emissions by 75 percent from 2008 levels.

HOW SOLAR BEAVERTON WORKS

Solar Beaverton was a fixed-priced solarization program that provided Beaverton residents with discounted residential solar systems (savings up to 80 percent after state and federal credits) through a negotiated bulk-purchase contract with a local solar provider, LiveLight Energy. Through the program, the City researched and set standards for equipment, service, and warranties, which are all vetted by city staff so that homeowners don't have to worry about these key steps.

Solar Beaverton launched in May 2011 after a yearlong 2010 pilot program. The program greatly simplified the process of setting up solar for residents—a major perceived barrier—and guided participants through contracts, permitting and tax credit paperwork. The discounted price of a PV system was fixed and not dependent on the number of residents



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who sign up. Solar Beaverton not only offered solar electric systems, but also solar hot water, solar pool heating, solar attic fans, and electric car charging stations. Education was a major component of the program, with free workshops to educate residents about solar basics, financing, tax credits, and net metering.

The City chose LiveLight Energy after conducting a competitive bid process. LiveLight performed some program marketing, sales, and administration, but did not receive funding from the City. The City spent very little money to support Solar Beaverton:

\$15,000 in basic marketing and program support, and \$19,000 for an AmeriCorps member to help administer the program.

“Solar Beaverton was an ambitious idea that has surpassed all of our expectations. We are proud of the environmental, economic and social benefits it has brought to the Beaverton community.”

–Beaverton Mayor Denny Doyle

PROGRAM GOALS

- Produce local renewable energy to create a more energy-independent community.
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions to improve community sustainability.
- Create local jobs and support local contractors and manufacturers in Oregon's renewable energy sector.
- Simplify the process of installing solar panels, help residents take advantage of state and federal financial incentives, and expedite the permitting processes.

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

“Solar Beaverton was an ambitious idea that has surpassed all of our expectations,” said Mayor Denny Doyle. “We are proud of the accomplishments of the program, as well as the environmental, economic and social benefits it has brought to the Beaverton community.”

- In recognition of Solar Beaverton, Mayor Denny Doyle received the U.S. Conference of Mayors' 2012 Climate Protection Award in the small city category.
- More than 258 residential solar systems have been installed since the pilot program in 2010, which will prevent 961,050 pounds of CO2 pollution per year, the equivalent of planting 77.4 acres of trees.
- More than 975 residents have expressed interest in the program as of mid-2012.
- By 2012, the program had increased solar panel permitting in the City by 2,500% over all previous years combined, and in 2011 generated \$76,000 in permitting fees for the City.
- In 2011, the program helped create 15 local, living-wage jobs, and generated an estimated \$3 million in revenue for local businesses.
- Solar Beaverton emphasized support of local, statewide, and Pacific Northwest renewable energy businesses. The chosen contractor was a local, family-owned Oregon design and installation company and its trade ally for solar panel arrays was SolarWorld, with production facilities and U.S. headquarters in nearby Hillsboro, OR.
- As part of its commitment to give back to the community, the solar contractor built a public gazebo that demonstrates solar power. The gazebo, at the site of the Beaverton Farmers Market, doubles as a charging station for electric vehicles.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THE RFP

The RFP for a solar vendor was the City's first-ever RFP to include environmental criteria and buying local provisions—a major step forward for the City. Potential vendors were asked to describe their sustainability practices, employment practices, and use of local products. They were also asked to describe how they would contribute to the Beaverton community.

"We asked, 'What will you do for our community? What will you give back to our community?'" said Cindy Tatham, the City's Sustainability Manager. "I recommend that a local government bring forward examples from other jurisdictions to show vendors. And don't stop asking that question—it's relevant for any RFP. We got so much out of it, and it opened a door we didn't even know we had." In the case of Solar Beaverton, Livelight Energy built the solar gazebo at our local Farmer's Market as its contribution to the Beaverton community.

ADDITIONAL LESSONS LEARNED

Running a pilot: Before launching a full program, consider a year-long pilot program to test the waters. Beaverton's 2010 pilot set a reasonable goal to install 50 residential solar systems. Many lessons were learned during the pilot, such as the importance of community education and outreach, and the need for a competitive bid process by the City. The City also obtained invaluable feedback from program participants, and learned about perceptions that its permitting process was too expensive and slow.

Choosing a vendor: Evaluate a vendor based on its experience running a community-wide program. Beaverton chose a single vendor, rather than multiple ones, to ensure consistency in service and in marketing. When you choose a smaller company, says Tatham, "you have to be prepared for the ramp-up needed for this type and scale of this program, and that ramp-up takes some time" to set up the marketing, hiring, and other aspects. Also, determine what sort of financing options the vendor can provide your residents.

Elected official promotion: Be sure to get at least one elected official on board to be part of the program and tout its benefits. In Beaverton, the City used a letter from a city councilor who endorsed the program and in doing so helped promote it and legitimize it. Overall, the program would not have moved forward without the leadership and endorsement of Mayor Doyle, a major sustainability champion. Elected leadership is critical for success.

Buy-in from the permitting department: Make sure your permitting department staff are on board with the program and willing to deal with the additional volume of permits to process, says Tatham. Beaverton's solar program coincided with city staff layoffs, when additional solar permits would tax a smaller workforce. But since the department was self-funded, Tatham made sure that permitting staff understood that Solar Beaverton would deliver additional permitting revenue. Tatham also worked with permitting staff to streamline the permitting process and make the increased volume easier to deal with.



The solar gazebo at the Beaverton Farmers Market doubles as a charging station for electric vehicles.

Sharing your program: The City shared its contract, RFP, and marketing materials to make the ramp-up easier for neighboring city, Hillsboro.

More Information

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