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David Millar, upper left, and other students from South Plantation High School, display their fully functional solar-powered car at the Go Solar conference at Broward Convention Center.

Broward encourages solar energy with easier permits

Renewable energy accounted for more than half of all new electricity generation added in the country last year.

BY DOREEN HEMLOCK
Staff writer

Making energy from the sun seems a no-brainer for the Sunshine State, but the cost has proven to be a hurdle.

Broward County has taken a big step to cut costs for solar-panel systems on rooftops, and homeowners, businesses and other counties are taking notice, a Go Solar conference showed Friday.

With help from a \$673,000 federal grant, Broward has simplified the process to apply for permits for roof-top solar-panel systems, saving time and money — perhaps thousands of dollars per system.

Click on a website, choose one of several pre-approved solar-panel system designs, and you can get the go-ahead online for that installation in select areas of the county, officials said.

"It can all be done electronically in a few minutes — instead of a few weeks — in some cases," said Armando Linares, deputy director of Broward's Environmental Protection & Growth Management Department.

The change is key because the U.S.

Department of Energy estimates up to 40 percent of the cost of solar systems often involves expenses other than equipment, such as permits and design.

Fourteen cities in Broward are signed up for the one-stop permit program, which recently went live. Another nine Broward cities want to join. Plus, five counties in Florida are looking to use Broward's program as a model, including Miami-Dade and Orange, county officials said.

"And we're still waiting to hear from other cities and counties," added Linares.

More than 300 people turned out Friday at the Broward County Convention Center to learn more about the county's Go Solar program and opportunities for sun energy. Many were pleased to find out that costs are plunging as technology improves. Panels now run less than half the price from two years ago.

David Tringo, building department director for Weston, knows the challenges of solar first-hand. He shelled out \$56,000 last year to install 48 solar panels in the

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backyard of his sprawling Sunrise home. He figures his 10-kilowatt system produces enough energy to save him about \$250 a month on his electric bill. And it would probably cost him \$10,000 less for a similar system now, as costs drop.

Still, Tringo recognizes that many people can't afford to pay out tens of thousands of dollars for solar — even if they get hefty tax credits from Florida Power & Light Co. and the U.S. government after their outlay.

What would really boost solar locally is upfront financing, from loans to leases, participants agreed.

TD Bank, which operates a solar-powered bank in Fort Lauderdale, now lends for commercial solar systems, with loans generally from \$500,000 to \$5 million. But the bank doesn't offer loans for solar systems for homes, said Greg Kealey, regional manager for Florida for TD Equipment Finance.

Florida lags other states in installing and financing solar energy,

Go Solar Rooftop Challenge

What: A U.S. Department of Energy program to encourage solar panels on roofs of homes and businesses. Broward County received a grant to help with key issues, like simplified permits.

Broward cities participating: Coconut Creek, Dania Beach, Davie, Deerfield Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hallandale, Hillsboro Beach, Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Miramar, North Lauderdale, Oakland Park, Pompano Beach, Sunrise, Tamarac and unincorporated Broward County.

Broward cities seeking to join: Cooper City, Coral Springs, Hollywood, Lauderdale Lakes, Lighthouse Point, Parkland, Pembroke Pines, Southwest Ranches and Wilton Manors.

Counties looking to use Broward as a model: Miami-Dade, Monroe, Orange, Sarasota and Alachua.

More information: 954-519-1260 or broward.org/gogreen.

Source: Broward County Environmental Protection & Growth Management Department

partly because the state lacks a renewable energy standard or goal to spur companies and residents to act, analysts say.

California, Arizona and New Jersey led growth in solar installations through the first three quarters of 2012, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, a Washington D.C.-based trade group.

Installations of solar panels nationwide more than doubled in 2010 and 2011, and they were on

pace to rise about 70 percent last year to a new high, the trade group said. Renewable energy accounted for more than half of all new electricity generation added in the country last year, studies show.

Even so, solar accounts for less than 1 percent of energy produced nationwide, the group said, leaving ample room for growth, especially in the Sunbelt states.

The Go Solar Fest continues today from 9 a.m. to noon at the



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Jon Paulson, with South Florida Energy Savers, talks to Go Solar conference attendees. The Go Solar program, with help from a federal grant, is streamlining the permit process for putting solar panels on rooftops in select cities in Broward.

Broward County Convention Center, featuring exhibits from companies such as FPL, The Energy Store of Hollywood and solar-powered vehicles, including a solar racecar

made by students at South Plantation High School.

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