

Mar 9, 2012

## Solar firm unveils 'game changer'

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Vermont's newest energy firm is promising to revolutionize the solar industry by making roof-top installations affordable.

In a sales pitch that sounds too good to be true, the founders of SunCommon on Thursday in Williston said their innovative financial model makes it pay to go green. Using a combination of high-volume efficiencies and state and federal tax credits, founders say their Waterbury-based company can get customers into residential solar systems for less than what they're currently paying for electricity.

"Vermonters can save money now by doing the right thing," co-founder and co-president Duane Peterson said. "This is a game-changer for Vermont."

At a launch party attended by Gov. Peter Shumlin and Green Mountain Power CEO Mary Powell, dignitaries hailed a business plan that aims to convert thousands of residential rooftops into solar power generators.

It's a model tested last year in a pilot project at the non-profit Vermont Public Interest Research Group.

James Moore, a longtime renewable-energy advocate who left VPIRG to start SunCommon with Peterson, said departing for the private sector — which has allowed the company to collect start-up capital from outside investors — offers the quickest route to solar proliferation.

"I've spent the last seven years working with Vermonters and working with elected officials to help create a clean energy vision for Vermont," Moore said. "We get to actually make that vision a reality now."

SunCommon will effectively function as a matchmaker, partnering

customers in Vermont with a California-based manufacturer of residential solar systems.

Members of the 17-person staff at SunCommon will handle the design, permitting and acquisition of the solar units, and contract with a South Burlington-based electric company for installation.

Customers will acquire the unit through a zero-money-down lease. Monthly payments on the lease, Moore said, will be equal to or less than the \$100 to \$120 that an average Vermont homeowner pays for electricity.

“So the average Vermont homeowner can put a system on their roof with no money out of pocket, and then the monthly payment is less than what they’re paying for electric power from a utility,” Moore said.

SunCommon earns a commission on each unit leased.

Moore and Peterson say a high-volume installation strategy will keep costs down. By clustering jobs community-by-community, they say, installers will be able to “swarm” a town and maximize time spent on revenue-generating activities.

They’ve relied on tax credits, too, to make the numbers work. While customers won’t be involved in the acquisition of credits or incentives, the company that manufactures the solar units will be able to draw down federal renewable energy tax credits and lump-sum payments from the state designed to subsidize the start-up costs of solar projects.

Utilities — and, by extension, their ratepayers — also enter the equation. State law requires utilities like GMP to pay above-market rates for solar energy. GMP offers a 6-cent sweetener on top of that.

“You’ve heard the term no-brainer?” said Ben Cohen, co-founder of Ben & Jerry’s and member of the SunCommon board of advisers. “Well the deal SunCommon has figured out is such a no-brainer my brains are falling out of my head.”