

Cheq Bay group solar buy well ahead of expectations

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A photovoltaic system installed by Next Energy Solution illustrates the kind of system that can be installed on residential or commercial applications. The Shell Lake firm has extensive experience in both kinds of installation, said Chequamegon Bay Renewables spokeswoman Amber Vadnais.

[Next Energy Solution Photo](#)

An ambitious project to get as many homes in the Chequamegon Bay area as possible fitted with photovoltaic electric solar systems appears to be well on its way to exceeding the best hopes for its success.

Chequamegon Bay Renewables, also known as Cheq Bay, began a project in January to organize a group buy of PV systems for area residences and businesses. According to Cheq Bay Volunteer Board Member and manager for the group buy project Amber Vadnais, the goal was to have 30 or so participants in the project. This far, with about two months left to sign up, the number of individuals and businesses who have expressed serious interest has exceeded 100. If just half that number actually signs contracts, the group buy will greatly exceed anyone's hopes, Vadnais said.

In addition, Cheq Bay has selected an installer for the project. They are Next Energy Solution of Shell Lake, a firm with extensive experience in installing photovoltaic systems for both residential and commercial applications. Vadnais said they would be an excellent fit for the group buy project proposed by Cheq Bay.

“There have been other successful group buy programs in Wisconsin, in the past couple of years,” Vadnais said. “Really the goal is to get the best buy for solar, and we do that by collectively installing solar at the same time so the installer gets efficiencies in customer service and economies of scale with doing the installation.

“It is a program for both home and business owners who can install solar PV systems on their own property.”

Vadnais said Cheq Bay didn’t go into the project with a set number of installations they hoped to sign up.

“We were hoping to get 30 or so installations. We now have 110 sites signed up to get an assessment and quote from the installer,” she said. “We don’t know for sure how many will move forward, but if we get half of that, we will be the biggest group buy in the state of Wisconsin. That says a lot about our community, because the other ones have been in Madison and Milwaukee and bigger regions.”

Vadnais said she did not view a PV community energy garden proposed by Xcel Energy for construction next year as competition. She noted that the Bayfield Electric Cooperative is also planning a community energy garden.

“The more solar options the better,” she said. “The Community Solar Option is really beneficial for people who don’t have a good location on their property for solar, or if they are renters it’s a really good option. We are really happy that people will get to pick what is the best option for them.”

Vadnais said one advantage for businesses and homeowners was that by installing on their own property, they could take advantage of a 30 percent federal tax credit.

“Often solar will last well beyond the 25 year period; 40 to 50 years, maybe more, so you get a lot longer use out of it,” she said.

By installing their own solar array, homeowners and businesses can transfer that bottom-line benefit to themselves, a benefit that can be substantial especially when consideration is given to the fact that the proposed solar arrays have an average payback period of roughly 10 years. Another benefit is that there is no administrative cost for the effort of organizing the group buy.

“We are doing this totally volunteer, so there are no additional fees added; they are really getting the very best price possible,” Vadnais said. “One of the reasons we were motivated to do this is because that 30 percent tax credit is only good to 2019. After that, there is a step down in 2020 and into 2021, and then it goes away. We wanted to do this to really take advantage of the full tax credit.”

It’s an even better deal for commercial operators who take part, Vadnais said, because they have the ability to claim depreciation deductions on the investment.

“Between that and the Focus on Energy credits offered by Xcel, it’s a really opportune time to go solar,” she said.

Vadnais said a recent tariff on foreign solar equipment has had little if any impact on the overall cost of solar systems.

“It’s really had a very minimal, if any impact on the price,” she said. “We had a goal of what we wanted the pricing to be, and even after the tariff, it’s right in there.”

People taking part in the group buy have until April 30 to sign their contracts.

“Estimates and contracts are already going on right now,” she said. “Some people are going to sign their contracts before then, and so they will begin as soon as possible. But most of them will be installed in May through August and into September.”

People who are interested in participating in the group buy or finding out more information can contact Cheq Bay at cheqbayrenewables@gmail.com.

Vadnais said she is very excited by the high level of interest demonstrated by the community for the group buy. She said part of that was the growing realization that PV systems are a realistic approach, even in a far northern area like the Chequamegon Bay region.

“We’ve tried to educate everyone on the fact that it is a good investment, even here, and of course, good for the environment,” she said

Vadnais said Chequamegon Bay Renewables is having a “meet the installer” day at 6 p.m., Thursday, March 8, at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.