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Going solar pays dividends

Firm promises savings based on bulk deals

Rebecca U. Cho, Staff Writer

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Upland resident Matthew Taylor looked into solar energy for his home last year in order to save on his mounting electricity bill.

Months after installing solar panels his monthly bill is virtually nothing, he said.

"We actually generated more electricity than we used since we installed \ in March," Taylor said.

The company that helped him go solar is One Block Off the Grid, or 1BOG, which launched a campaign to homeowners in the Inland Empire this week. The San Francisco-based firm groups homeowners into communities that gain group discounts on solar installation by buying in bulk.

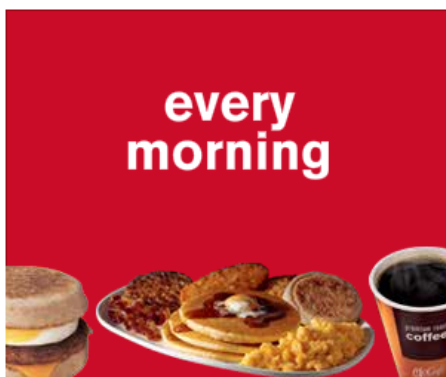
Taylor said he saved at least \$2,000 based on quotes he received from other companies by going with the group model.

Many homeowners want to go solar, but are uncertain about the pricing and best ways to go about installing the technology, said Dave Llorens, the firm's chief executive officer.

"The \ industry is oftentimes unwilling to take a leap of faith to be upfront about costs," Llorens said. "We don't think that's the way to go. The ultimate goal is to remove trust issues and the inefficiencies of the sale process."

1BOG negotiates group discounts on residential solar systems with installation companies on a fixed pricing system. The firm walks homeowners through the process and its customers know hundreds of others are getting the same deal, Llorens said. The company profits from referral fees from its installation partners.

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The idea can catch on. The Inland Empire and the rest of the state are ripe for the development of solar energy usage, said Bernadette Del Chiaro, clean energy advocate at the nonprofit Environment California Research & Policy Center.

"It doesn't surprise me there're these new business models popping up because we're seeing a dramatic growth in the demand for rooftop solar," Del Chiaro said.

California was home to about 51,000 solar roofs last year, or 500 megawatts of solar power capacity, according to the policy center's research. This was a dramatic growth since 1999, when California had 500 solar roofs.

The demand for solar in the San Bernardino and Riverside counties should be greater than it is because of the high energy bills and heat, Del Chiaro said. She said she had not heard of 1BOG nor group purchasing in solar energy and cautioned consumers to shop around.

The solar firm, founded in 2008, has launched campaigns in 12 U.S. markets. 1BOG helped install solar in 700 homes in 2009. Its installation partner in the Inland Empire is HeliPower.

Interested parties can sign up on the company's website, 1bog.org. An educational event will be held at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at 10435 Ashford St., Rancho Cucamonga. RSVP at solareducationalevent.eventbrite.com.

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