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Solar Plus Efficiency Is Finally Starting To Catch On

My last two columns in Going Green discussed the economics of solar power giving two examples based on a high annual electric bill and a relatively low one. The columns also talked about the rebate dropping by the end of this month. As of the time of this writing it hasn't happened yet, however, by the time you read this on Saturday it may have. You can check here - <http://www.csi-trigger.com/>; if it still says "Step 7" on the PG&E row, just subtract the "MW under review" from the "MW Available" to see what's left. Of course this only applies to residential projects; we still have a ways to go before the rebate drops for commercial projects.

But fear not, as there is always a bright sunny opportunity remaining when it comes to solar and energy efficiency. The bright spot is that, while a residential system won't get as many rebate dollars, the Federal Tax credit will lessen that loss by 30%. And to (finally!) get to the subject of this weeks article, the combination of solar and efficiency can, if done properly, get you back to the same return on investment you may have just missed out on! I'll explain why.

While every building is different I've found that most existing homes – even relatively new ones – have a variety of cost-effective efficiency opportunities to take advantage of. And when I say "cost-effective" what I'm saying is the savings can usually exceed the cost from the first year forward. If you've seen any of my past columns you know how this works – the annual loan cost is less than the annual energy savings and mortgage interest deduction!



PG&E held a workshop last Monday on "Solar Plus Efficiency" at the Auburn Holiday Inn, and as someone who's promoted this concept for decades, it was heartening to see PG&E has caught on. They gave a number of examples for efficiency wherein the combined cost of solar plus efficiency was less – and the savings greater – than just solar alone. That's one reason why Sustainable Energy Group doesn't have your typical "solar company" name. We're all about the Big Picture and working hard to help people find the most compelling investment opportunities available these days by looking at the synergistic impacts of solar and efficiency together.

PG&E has been trying to get people more interested in efficiency for years. They know that solar electric systems have pretty much been flying off the shelves onto roof tops for years, especially lately given the huge price drops we've seen. They started requiring that solar contractors provide homeowners with an "efficiency audit report" as part of a solar electric rebate application for that reason. The only problem with that has been that few if any "solar companies" have any knowledge or expertise in the area of energy efficiency. Compounding the problem is the fact that PG&E's online home audit tool is woefully inadequate (even they admit this). And on top of that, from my experience

as well as theirs, people are simply reluctant to consider energy efficiency. It's just not as new, sexy, space-age, and cool as a solar power system in most peoples minds.

That's unfortunate because efficiency has so much more to offer than solar power alone. Efficiency done right solves a whole host of problems solar power doesn't touch. Like gas usage for example! Many homes have comfort or health and safety problems that solar can't address either. And one of the biggest energy wasters out there – ducted forced air heating and cooling systems – aren't fixed with the addition of a solar power system!

The moral of the story is that the average home wastes about half the energy it uses considering cost-effective alternatives available today. So if you're tired of sending more and more of your hard-earned paychecks off to PG&E every month just know that they – and we – are here to help!

Ray Darby is President of Sustainable Energy Group Inc., a Grass Valley company offering energy efficiency and solar services for residential and commercial buildings, from comparing the alternatives through installation and servicing of energy systems of all types. You can reach him at 530-273-4422, via email RayDarby@SustainableEnergyGroup.com, or visit their web site at www.SustainableEnergyGroup.com.