

HOW CAN WE GET MORE SOLAR PANELS INSTALLED?

BY [BOB SCHILDGEN](#) | MAR 31 2016

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Hey Mr. Green,

We hear about the great promise of solar energy, but now it accounts for less than 1 percent of our total electricity production. In the best of all possible worlds, where Mr. Green reigned as the Energy Czar, how would you get more solar installed?

—Terry in Erie, Pennsylvania

As Energy Czar, I would require the installation of solar panels (provided there was enough sunlight) whenever a new house was built or an existing house was sold. The panels would be incorporated into building codes, just like toilets, water heaters, and all the other amenities introduced since our ancestors began improving their unsafe, unhealthy, uncomfortable hovels.

It's easy to imagine the developers screaming, "What about the cost? It's a socialist plot!" But—not so much. With median home prices at \$220,000, the added cost of clean energy is barely a blip. The price of residential solar has been dropping fast and now averages about the same as that of fossil fuel power, according to the latest government estimates.

For example, getting 1,000 kilowatt-hours of solar electricity from your rooftop every year for the next 25 years would cost about \$3,000 if you paid up front, close to what conventional power would cost over that period. Of course, if the price of fossil fuel power goes up, solar owners end up with a better deal. With home sales averaging 5.5 million a year, this single initiative would bring about a huge number of solar installations.

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One city has already adopted my Energy Czar plan: Two years ago, Lancaster, California, a city of about 160,000 (and hardly a hotbed of radicals), passed a law requiring all newly built residences to install one kilowatt of solar power. A city planning official tells me that there was little objection to this rule, and many of the 300 new residences built since the ordinance was passed have installed more solar capacity than required.

The mayor who spearheaded the solar power proposal is a Republican, and Lancaster has a much higher proportion of registered Republicans than California has as a whole. This suggests that some prominent politicians may be out of touch with their base when it comes to concerns about clean energy and global warming.

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Information provided for you by ~

Marilyn K. Dayton, Your Marketing Consultant & Coach

<http://www.marketingandbizpro.com> ~ marilyn@marketingandbizpro.com

860-389-2521

