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## ENVIRONMENT

# A way to get solar energy — no rooftop panels required — is making headway in Illinois: 'Community solar is about to explode.'

By Nara Schoenberg  
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Solar panels are part of the Glenwood Solar Project community solar farm, on Oct. 11, 2022, in Chicago Heights. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

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There are no shiny black solar panels on the roof of his condo building, but Paul Dickerson is enjoying the benefits of clean energy just the same.

Dickerson, 73, of Oak Park, has signed up for what is known in Illinois as community solar — a program in which residents subscribe to nearby solar farms, reducing planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions and receiving discounts on their electric bills.



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Brandishing charts of their electricity costs during a recent interview, Dickerson and his fellow members of the building's green committee, Elaine Johnson and Art Spooner, said they're all paying less with community solar, as is their 28-unit building, which is saving about \$40 a month on electricity for its common spaces.

"Try it you'll like it," Dickerson said. "You'll save money and you'll feel good about saving the planet — at least a little bit."



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Increasingly popular in Illinois, community solar was pioneered on the West Coast in the mid-2000s as a way to bring clean energy to the many American households — almost 50% by some estimates — that don't have access to solar panels, often because residents can't afford them, don't own their homes or don't get enough sun on their roofs.

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Art Spooner, from left, Paul Dickerson and Elaine Johnson — who have community solar in their condo building — show charts of their electricity costs outside their Oak Park building on Sept. 29, 2022. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

The solar energy in community solar doesn't actually flow into your home, but it flows into your area's power grid, providing electricity to homes and businesses in your region of the state, and you reap the benefits of government solar incentives in the form of lower electricity bills.

Community solar is gaining ground in states such as New York, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Maine and Illinois, which in 2021 had enough community solar to power about 44,000 homes, up from 17,000 homes in 2020.

"Community solar is about to explode in terms of access and truly being able to see it everywhere and in your community," said Nicole Steele, a senior adviser at the U.S. Department of Energy's solar technologies office. "It's just another way to help in the clean energy transition, be part of the clean energy transition, and see the actual benefits."

Community solar is taking off at a time when many states and the federal government have committed to ambitious plans to move to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with solar (in all its forms) expected to [eventually generate up to about 45% of our electricity](#).

In interviews with the Tribune, some Chicago-area early adopters complained that they receive two electric bills a month under community solar — one from ComEd and one from a solar farm — a system they find cumbersome and difficult to understand.

But those with the time and skills to drill down on the numbers said they were satisfied with what they found and a watchdog told the Tribune that in all the Illinois cases she knows of but one — an apparent billing error

— customers really are seeing financial savings.

“Community solar is one of those things here in Illinois that might sound too good to be true,” said Sarah Moskowitz, deputy director of the Citizens Utility Board, an Illinois consumer advocacy group. “But for once, CUB is here to assure people that you can actually save money, and it’s a great program.”

A longtime environmentalist, Spooner put “installing solar panels on the roof” at the top of his to-do list when he retired from his job as a manufacturing and quality manager in 2016.

Unfortunately, his home at the time had a clay-tile roof.

Seated in the carefully restored lobby of his Greek Revival condo building — a former YMCA with two-story limestone columns — Spooner chuckled at the memory.

“The (solar panel) companies said they never did solar panels on clay tiles before. And it’s like, c’mon, what kind of song and dance are you givin’ me?” he said.

Dickerson smiled. “They certainly have it in California,” the retired electrical engineer said dryly.

Spooner looked for alternatives and found community solar but couldn’t subscribe. The option wasn’t yet widely available in Illinois.

“The more I learned, the more frustrating it got,” he said.

When the village of Oak Park offered a community solar option to residents, he finally got his chance. He and his wife signed up in 2020, as did Johnson, a retired school and children’s librarian, and her husband.

Dickerson and his wife opted to consider the plans available to the general public and went with Nexamp.

Spooner and Dickerson calculate they’re saving about 10% on their total electric bills, when taxes, fees and delivery charges are included.

“You can see here, this is for the condo association and this is for our unit,” said Dickerson, pointing to a graph he had printed out. “I save between \$3 and \$4 a month, depending on which month it is and which 12-month period I’m averaging, and the condo saves \$40 a month.”

Community solar plans benefit Illinois utilities like ComEd, which are required to obtain 40% of their electric power from renewable resources by 2030 and 50% by 2040. To meet those state requirements, utilities purchase certificates that represent the environmental benefits of renewable energy. Community solar farms are one source of those certificates.

Illinois offers particularly strong consumer protections for low- and moderate-income residents who sign up for community solar through the state’s [Illinois Solar for All program](#). Participants in this program, who must meet income eligibility requirements, can’t be charged upfront costs and must get a discount of at least 50% on the portion of their electricity covered by the credit on their ComEd bill. (The credit covers a large portion of the electricity used but generally not quite all of it due to factors such as variations in the amount of energy the customer uses and variations in the total energy produced by the solar farm.)

Higher-income people who sign up for community solar under what is known as Illinois Shines don't get a guaranteed level of savings. But they do get several other important customer protections, according to Illinois Power Agency consumer protection counsel Rachel Granneman.



Mourning doves on solar panels at the Glenwood Solar Project community solar farm on Oct. 11, 2022, in Chicago Heights. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

Approved vendors, who are listed at [the Illinois Shines website](#), have to meet a range of state requirements, including a standard disclosure form solar farms have to give to consumers. The form allows consumers to make side-by-side comparisons of offers from companies. In addition, contracts have to include relevant information such as prices and fees. And misrepresentations — such as overstating customer savings — are prohibited.

“We have a hotline and an email address and a complaint form on our website,” said Granneman. “If there are issues a customer can't resolve with their approved vendor we may take disciplinary action.”

The Illinois Power Agency, which administers state programs supporting the development of new solar energy, has the power to suspend community solar farms from its programs, which offer significant financial incentives.

In theory, a solar vendor could offer you a subscription that would cost you more than staying with ComEd, but in practice, Granneman and CUB's Moskowitz said they aren't seeing that.

At this point, all of the community solar offers that Granneman is seeing are set up in the same way: Customers get 10% to 20% off the electricity covered by the credit on their utility bill. She isn't seeing a

separate subscriber fee — although there's nothing to prevent companies from charging that additional fee, as long as they disclose that they are doing so.

Moskowitz said she has only seen one case of a person in Illinois paying more under community solar than they would have otherwise — and that was due to an apparent error in calculating the person's energy needs.

“So far, so good,” Moskowitz said.

In northern Illinois, community solar customers generally get an initial bill from ComEd, with a credit equal to most of the electricity they have used. You don't pay for the energy covered by the credit, just for the other portions of your ComEd bill.

Then comes step 2: a bill from your community solar company. At this point, you actually do pay for the electricity covered by the credit on your ComEd bill, but typically at a 10% to 20% discount. The difference between what you would have paid for electricity under ComEd, and what you end up paying under community solar, is your savings.

For instance, you might get a credit for \$50 of electricity on your ComEd bill. You wouldn't pay ComEd for any of that electricity; instead, you'd pay your solar company, but at a discount. So you'd save about 10% to 20% of \$50, or \$5 to \$10.

Find that confusing? You're not alone.

“It's not very transparent to me,” said Kay Perry of Oak Park. A beamline scientist who works at Argonne National Laboratory, Perry signed up when Oak Park offered a community solar option to residents.

She said she feels good about supporting clean energy but doesn't like the two-part billing process and had trouble signing up, in part because her workplace computer is behind a strong firewall. She'd like to see community solar offered the same way wind energy was offered under a previous Oak Park program, with just one easy-to-understand bill showing the discounted electricity rate.

“You have to make it as easy as possible for people if you want them to do it — lower that activation energy,” Perry said.

Laurel Passera, senior director for policy and regulatory affairs at the Coalition for Community Solar Access, acknowledged that Illinois' community solar model is “rather complex,” but she said it has its advantages, including that it's less contentious and more acceptable to utilities.

“We spent months and months diving into the details on this to make sure it worked for all the parties,” she said of talks in 2016 and 2021 involving industry, utilities, diversity advocates and advocates for low-income consumers.

Passera added that auto-pay can eliminate the need to deal with two separate bills.

With community solar on the rise in Illinois, there are now credible online sources that can help you compare the various options. CUB, for instance, [breaks down Illinois community solar offers](#) on its website.

EnergySage, an online comparison-shopping marketplace that has received funding from the U.S. Department of Energy, [offers customer ratings](#) of local community solar plans.

Moskowitz said she advises those comparing community solar plans to consider the length of the contract, whether there's an exit fee if you leave early, and how much you'll save on electricity. The best deals she's seeing offer 20% off the ComEd rate for electricity.

You may also want to check whether the community solar company accepts checks or electronic payments, and whether automatic billing is required.

"We want people to be cautious, read the contract, and call us if they have any questions and let us know if they have any issues," said Moskowitz. "We haven't heard of issues, really, but if there are we want to be on top of them."

When it comes to protecting the planet, Johnson, Spooner and Dickerson are accustomed to being ahead of the curve.

Dickerson traces his commitment to protecting the natural world back to his days as a Boy Scout, when leaders emphasized that you should "leave no trace" in the forest.

For Spooner, the first Earth Day, in 1970, made an impression.



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"I was a senior in college and they said, 'Think globally, act locally,'" recalled Spooner. "I was like 'Well, I can kind of manage that.'"

After experiences such as sorting recyclables in the 1980s (Dickerson), forgoing harmful detergents in the 1960s (Johnson) and volunteering with an interfaith environmental group (Spooner), subscribing to community solar wasn't a big leap. And even in their larger community at their condo building, the program was a fairly easy sell, Dickerson said.

Residents wanted information, he said, so members of the condo association's green committee called solar company representatives and made a chart.

The big pushback was on the issue of contracts, which can be as long as 20 years, so the condo association went with a company that allowed them to cancel their contract with no penalty.

Now, the building's green newsletter, edited by Johnson, is trumpeting community solar savings, and the green committee is moving on to other projects, including electric vehicle chargers and composting.

"As a parent and then a grandparent, it's kind of like a legacy," Johnson said of this work. "How could I do something that's bad for the world in which my grandchildren are going to live?"



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## Man arrested for allegedly threatening to ‘mutilate and kill’ GOP candidate for governor Darren Bailey

A Chicago man was arrested for allegedly threatening to “mutilate and kill” Republican candidate for governor Darren Bailey in a voicemail left at one of his offices, according to a police report.

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