

Cape company adds solar to new-home construction

Solar First: Tax credits, power costs, make building with or adding a solar system make 'cents'

By CJ HADDAD

cjhaddad@breezenewspapers.com

A Cape Coral business is looking to pave the way for solar energy in Southwest Florida, and recently completed the first from-the-ground-up solar spec home in the Cape.

Solar First, founded and headquartered in Cape Coral by Derek Piotter, is hoping to help local residents save a buck by building their prospective home with solar, or add to an existing structure. As Hurricane Ian just proved, being without power for potentially weeks on end, especially in the heat, can be just as dangerous as it is uncomfortable. Battery back-up solar systems can continue to keep power circulating even while off the grid.

Piotter, born and raised in Cape Coral before leaving the state to pursue other ventures, said he wanted to make a difference in the community he calls home.

He was looking into some of the energy-efficient developments that were out there three years ago when Florida had some of the lowest electricity rates in the nation.

Piotter said adding solar onto existing homes then wouldn't have made the difference it would today, so he looked into building new homes equipped to run on solar. If solar is part of new construction, the homebuyer receives a 30% tax credit on the roof supporting the solar system in addition to the standard 30% tax credit that they receive on the solar system. Additionally, builders receive a \$2,500 tax credit if they build an energy-efficient home.

Fast-forwarding years later, Florida no longer boasts minimal energy rates.

"After the war in Ukraine, and massive energy increases that we saw, at that point, it became economically viable to add solar to existing homes," Piotter said. "So, it's been an interesting shift since we've been in this market."

Solar First constructed the first ground-up solar spec home this past April, meaning the house was built and designed for solar power use. The home is in the 2000 block of Northwest 45th Place and was sold this year with the homeowner currently occupying the space.

"This was the first one that we were developing as a ground-up spec," Piotter said. "With those tax credits, it also allows people to achieve a very large tax credit after they moved in, which can be very helpful to first-time home buyers, or people that are scraping together to get to a down payment on a house. Also, to have their energy needs bundled into their mortgage where they can write off interest on the tax with that as well."

Piotter, a Cape High graduate, found success in other walks of life after graduating college and pursuing business opportunities in New York. After that paid off, he felt the calling to come back home.

"I realized that I really wanted to return home and build a business in my hometown to truly help where I came from," he said. "When I was in high school, you didn't really have a lot of businesses to look up to locally."

"When the economics changed, I realized that building an overall solar business here that focuses on commercial and residential (is something missing). Solar companies would come in and are incentivized to sell to the consumer at an outsized rate, and that sales team disappears to the state they came from."

Piotter said when solar is sold "incorrectly" it results in a negative experience for the end consumer. He wanted to change that.

"I want to provide solar with the correct education with the end consumer in mind rather than profits," Piotter said.

He returned to Cape Coral in 2020 and founded the company to help better serve residents.

Piotter said now is a great time to look into solar, as the Florida legislature extended the tax credit for solar for an additional 10 years.

"At this moment solar has reached an inflection period where the price has come down to such a level that you'll see a traditional payback period in less than 10 years."

"There are very few things you can do with your home to offset your bills and provide a way to lock in costs in the future."

Piotter said banks have even hopped on board to help finance solar systems.

While the Sunshine State would be an ideal location to install solar, quite frankly, some just don't like the way it looks. Piotter can sympathize.

"Personally, I don't like seeing solar on the front of a



Solar First, founded and headquartered in Cape Coral by Derek Piotter, recently completed the first new construction spec home built to include solar energy in the Cape. The home, in the northwest Cape Coral, retains its curb appeal as the solar panels are unobtrusive from the street.

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house," he said. "In Florida, it's more about blending it nicely with the house. For example, I have a black metal roof and the black panels blend in to where you almost don't notice it. It's important to have a company that listens to what concerns are about appearance and designs a system (to make the individual happy)."

When it comes to how these panels will hold up in a hurricane, Piotter said he had some concerns as well (despite lab testing), but the proof was in the pudding after Ian, a Category 4 storm.

"Everybody would say, 'Wait until a hurricane, those panels will be flying off.' I heard that from everybody," Piotter said. "I went to my mother's house to help her during the actual storm, and when I pulled back up to my house, truthfully, you don't know what to expect. And when I saw every single panel on my house intact, just as described, it was elation. It was the ultimate confirmation."

Piotter said solar panels can actually strengthen a roof. "They act as a bracing system because they anchor into the trusses," he said. "There were cases (with houses with solar) where one side of a roof came off, but the area with the panels are were there and reinforced. You wouldn't expect it, but you see the proof after. Our installation team didn't have one system lost after Ian."

Perhaps the icing on the cake when it comes to having solar during a storm in the ability to run off the grid when power goes up using a backup battery and microinverters,

which Solar First offers customers.

"It's a game changer," Piotter said. "And the tax credit applies to the batteries as well."

Anyone with existing solar without a battery, can still have one installed with a tax credit.

"For people who are on dialysis or other medical equipment, it provides continuous power," Piotter said. "Generators are great, but a lot of things can happen with generators as we know. And having that backup battery is a huge benefit for people."

Piotter said at the end of the day, solar isn't just about going green, it's about saving green.

"Where people fall on the environmental scale, that's subjective and can depend on every single person's wants and needs," he said. "In terms of saving money, everybody out there wants to save money. And if you can properly educate the market that solar is an investment and saves them money as opposed to pitching it as an environmental benefit... that's where you can tap into the marketplace."

"It was hard before to present an economic case to add solar to the home. I think now it's a combination of tax credits the government has put forth, combined with our staggering increases in electricity costs locally. We've seen 30 to 40% increases over the last few years. It makes overwhelming sense for people to elect to go solar."

For more information on Solar First, visit www.solarfirst.us or call 239-297-4072.