

Group buying projects aims to increase solar installations in Oregon town

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[Amanda H. Miller](#)

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Solarize Eugene kicked off March 19 and will offer bulk discounts to Eugene, Ore., residents looking to go solar in the next three months.

The Resource Innovation Group, a local nonprofit, organized the solarize effort and modeled it after other successful programs, particularly the Portland, Ore., program that pioneered the solarize movement. The model selects a preferred contractor who will sell to everyone in the community who learns about solar through community-wide organized efforts to educate the population about opportunities, financing, benefits and expenses. The contractor saves because he can buy in bulk and doesn't have to use as many resources finding customers, said Eugene Resource Innovation Group spokeswoman Sarah Mazze. Mazze said the group took one major issue into consideration when it developed the program based on criticisms from similar programs in other communities.

"One of the biggest complaints was that the smaller local contractors would be edged out by bigger ones who were selected for the contracts," Mazze said.

Eugene's program required that any outside company responding to the request for proposals partner with a local installer. But local [solar installers](#) went big and partnered with each other. There are only five major installers in the town, who focus exclusively on solar installation, Mazze said.

This way the local installers can all win, she said.

The installers will help with the education component of the program in leading workshops and answering questions.

Community members who are interested in solar will be able to take advantage of special bulk discounts and fixed pricing through the Solarize Eugene program. And they will be able to act in confidence that they're buying solar through a vetted source.

"People trust us," Mazze said of the resource center. "There isn't any financial gain for us in this."

She said the goal is to double last year's solar installations, which included 60 [solar photovoltaic installations](#) and 10 solar thermal.

The primary limitation will be the Eugene Water and Electric Board, which capped incentives and spread them through quarterly release dates. There is \$120,000 available in the April release, which would be enough for 20 to 30 installations, Mazze said. And new ones won't become available until July.

She said some of those [solar project incentives](#) will likely go to people who missed the February release before any of the Solarize Eugene projects ever get a crack at the funding and people might pass on the program if they can't get rebates.

"It could be that what the program ends up achieving is just more education and information for now and people won't act until next year," Mazze said.

And that wouldn't be bad, she said.