

SONIC DRIVE-IN TAKES ADVANTAGE OF SOLAR PANEL DEAL

Ribbon cutting scheduled for Friday

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Photo By: Patrick Johnson - DELETED
 Sonic goes solar

NW Photon owner Kirk Cameron (left) helped Andrea and Jess Wetsel install a 9.9 kilowatt solar panel array that will help reduce energy costs in their Wilsonville Sonic restaurant.

The canopy at Wilsonville's Sonic Drive-in turns out to be useful for more than just sheltering cars from the weather.

"Turns out they are almost the perfect angle for solar panels," said owner Jess Wetsel. "Normally they have to put in brackets to get them to the right angle, but the pitch of the roof is almost the same. It saved some cost of putting them in."

He recently had a 45-panel, 9.9 kilowatt solar panel array installed on one of the canopies at his Wilsonville Sonic. It's the first time the Wetsels have tried solar panels and now hope to add panels to their Tigard and Hillsboro locations as well.

A ribbon cutting is scheduled for 2-2:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 25 at the Wilsonville location.

"We made the decision to put it in because solar power fits in to our desire to be community oriented and it's part of our mission statement to be a good citizen," Wetsel said. "Normally something like this wouldn't be economically feasible, but with the grants we are receiving it makes it to where we can do this."

The panels can generate up to 11,380 kilowatts of electricity per year. This is the first array to be installed on a Sonic in the Pacific Northwest, according to Kirk Cameron, president of NW Photon Energy.

The Wetsel's solar initiative allows them to produce and sell electricity to Portland General Electric through PGE's Solar Payment Option, or solar "Feed-in-Tariff" program. Established in 2009, the program's customers receive payments from PGE for the electricity generated by their installation instead of receiving kilowatt-hour credits like net metering customers.

Wetsel wouldn't divulge the cost of the system, but expects to recoup his costs in about six years.

"Normally this wouldn't be economically feasible, but with the programs out there it made it the right thing to do," he said. "If you are doing this to make money on it, you are going to be disappointed."

NW Photon Energy, based in Lake Oswego, designed and installed the arrays, and is one of the first companies to use the city of Wilsonville's updated building codes regarding solar panel installation.

Wilsonville building official Martin Brown said that, under the new codes, solar panel projects don't have to go through the Development Review Board, but instead are an over-the-counter permit. However, Sonic's solar array was bigger and heavier and did require a building inspection.

"With the bigger arrays that weigh more we like to have an inspector go out and make sure everything is safe," Brown said.

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Cameron and Wetsel said they are impressed with the new codes and the ease of getting the proper permits, a process that took only two days.

“We had quite a go when we went through the planning process to build this place,” Wetsel said. “To see how easy it was for Kirk, I was kind of jealous.”

Walgreens, also located in the Lowrie’s Marketplace, has rooftop solar panels.

Cameron said the panels were installed with a clamping system, called S-5, which didn’t require him to drill into the metal canopy. This also reduces the chance of leaks.

“The system is fast and efficient, the maintenance is minimal and the power that Sonic produces will have a resell value of 59-cents per kilowatt hour totaling \$6,700 annually.”

Sonic currently has one bank of the solar panels, mostly because there are only limited spaces in the PGE program. To keep the project economically feasible, the restaurant had to stay under a 10 kilowatt system, Cameron said.

But social consciousness played a more important role than economics.

“We wanted to do this to help the environment, be socially conscious and because we want to support community goals,” Andrea Wetsel said. “You group those three things together, and it was the right thing to do.”



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