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Weakley Countian sees golden opportunity in solar power

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By SANDY KOCH
Feature Writer

While cloudless hot days were bad news for farmers' crops this summer, they provided John Cole with a golden opportunity to check out a new, shiny toy in his front yard on Ryan Road outside of Martin. The first in the county to get "on the grid" with an array of solar panels, Cole is monitoring with interest his six solar panels that he finished installing in February.

"As far as we know, John is the only one in the county to get this," said Andrea Harrington, project engineer at Weakley County Municipal Electric System "There has been an interest, but no else has carried through."

A University of Kentucky trained engineer who works at Republic in McKenzie, Cole set up the panels after work and on weekends over several months, and then went through the painstaking process of inspections and getting hooked up to the electric grid. Weakley County Municipal Electrical System (WCMES) acted as the middle man for the project, setting up a meter to monitor the intake from the panels. TVA inspectors came out to approve the set-up. It was a learning process for everyone, recalled Cole.

He estimated he put about \$7,000 in materials, but admitted he went a little "overboard" in designing his frame, which is extremely sturdy and lightning-proof. "A roof-mounted racking system would be cheaper," he said. He is also located pretty far from the transformer.

The six panels Cole has now can be tilted on an adjustable frame and rack system on a pole at different angles to maximize the sunlight that hits them. He said that for the region's latitude, the panels do best at a 35-degree angle normally but are set at 55 degrees in the fall and winter.

The setup has about a 25-year life and he figures the payback may be about seven years. Numerous federal tax incentives help ease the pain. Already, TVA pays him about \$45 a month for electricity. He said that could easily triple the size of the set-up.

Taking advantage of alternative energy incentives from federal and state programs, Cole applied for and received about \$6,000 in grants from the Volunteer State Solar Initiative to study solar installation in Colorado at Solar Energy International last year. He also lined up a distributorship from Sunwize in California.

Eventually, Cole hopes to interest farmers and homeowners in northwest Tennessee in going the solar route. He said he gets several phone calls a month asking about solar installation, which he plans to do from a company he has named after his neighborhood, Mt. Pelia Innovative Solutions.

So far, the longer payback period on a solar investment has deterred most people from going the solar route, said Harrington at WCMES.

"They seem to be going more into upgrading their fixtures to save money," he said.

But with the sun playing such a prominent role in Weakley County summers these days, and the price of energy ever a source of concern, Cole is betting that more area residents will want to invest in the solar alternative. Published in The WCP 10.4.12

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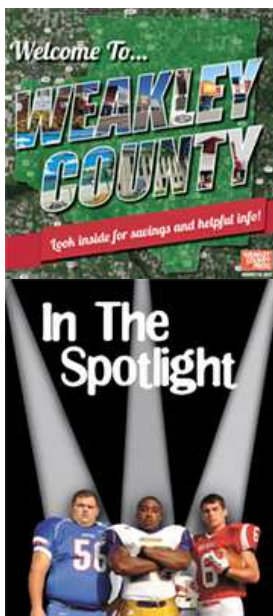
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