

Whitfield couple pioneering solar power in area

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By:

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VARNELL, Ga. — “I like taking care of my baby,” Christian Kipker said about the solar panel outfit in his backyard as a rare rain fell Friday.

As he walked back to the house, he flipped a switch on the side of the home. “This is cool,” he said. Inside, the refrigerator hummed and the lights glowed thanks to the solar panel system.

Mr. Kipker and his girlfriend, Vicky Alt, first fired up their \$20,000 solar panel system at their home near Varnell on Oct. 10.

“It just makes sense,” Ms. Alt said. “Instead of getting power from fossil fuels that have been developed for a million years, you’re making it right here and now.”

According to the Whitfield County Planning and Zoning Office, the couple’s system is the first residential project of its kind in the county. U.S. Floors on Corporate Drive near Connector 3 in Dalton also is breaking new ground in local industry with a \$313,000 solar panel project under way now.

At the couple’s home, nine 3- by 5-foot solar panels convert the sun’s rays into energy — up to 2 kilowatts per day, enough to power 1 1/2 blow-dryers. That may not sound like much, but it’s more than enough to power all of the couple’s interior lights, refrigerator and coffeemaker.

The solar project is a hybrid system, meaning they still use North Georgia Electric Co.’s grid. All the energy the solar panels produce is cycled back to TVA, offsetting about half the electricity they use. The home can be powered exclusively by solar if the power goes out and it also has a backup battery system.

TVA gives energy credits to the couple and buys the solar energy for 15 cents per kilowatt. North Georgia Electric gave the couple a \$500 credit for installing the system and the state and federal governments will give tax credits on the project. Altogether, Ms. Alt said, the tax deductions will save them about \$10,000 and the system will eventually pay for itself.

Kerry Saltmarsh of Sustainable Futures, the Knoxville-based business that sold and installed the solar panel system, said Northwest Georgia gets at least five hours of sun per day even in the winter, so solar is an energy option in this area.

“There’s really no demand right now in Northwest Georgia but the demand is increasing in East Tennessee,” she said. “With global warming and people getting more accepting that something’s got to be done, in 10 years (solar panels) will be a more commonplace sight in Northwest Georgia.”



Staff Photo by Margaret Fenton Christian Kipker and Vicky Alt stand in the rain under their new solar panel at their Cohutta, Ga., home. As part of the TVA generation partners program, last month, they put power back into the TVA grid for 20 days, giving them a monetary credit on their electric bill. The panels do not harness as much energy on overcast days, but the house can run on a battery the panel previously charged.

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