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Seminar touts viability of solar power

BY COSBY WOODRUFF • NOVEMBER 4, 2009

Solar power production has long been technologically feasible for Alabama, according to an expert. Now,



he said it is economically viable as well.

Henry Brandhorst, a professor of engineering at Auburn University, said the biggest stumbling block for a homeowner or business wanting to install a solar power system in Alabama is finding someone qualified to hook up the system. The cost of solar power is about equal to commercial electricity, he said. Incentives can lower that

cost and reduce the break-even period.

Commercial power is becoming more expensive, he noted, but the cost of solar power is coming down, shortening the pay-back period even more. "The cost of solar power declines about 20 percent with every doubling of capacity," he said. The solar power system itself is both affordable and dependable. Alabama, especially southeast Alabama, gets plenty of sunny days to power a system, he said.

Brandhorst told a group of engineers and architects at a lunch-and-learn seminar Tuesday that old, stereotypical reasons not to install solar systems in the state have been clearly debunked. At the seminar, sponsored by Max Credit Union and Goodwyn Mills & Cawood, he said Alabama is a more than viable location for solar power.

He said Alabama gets about 20 percent less sunlight in an average year than prime spots in the Southwest, but it still gets 30 percent more than places such as New Jersey and Pennsylvania, both hot spots for solar installation. The state receives up to 50 percent more sun each year than Germany, which is the international leader in solar power.



Ed Grimes, head of Service Business Dept. for MAX Credit Union, talks to those at a solar energy seminar in downtown Montgomery, AL., on Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2009. (Montgomery Advertiser, Lloyd Gallman)

"We have more sunshine than most of the world," he said. Still, the state has only one large-scale solar project online. A new justice center in Lee County went to solar energy for its primary source of electricity earlier this year. He hopes the Opelika facility sparks enough interest so that such projects become commonplace, or at least frequent enough to prompt Alabama contractors to become certified in installing the systems.

For the Lee County project, managers had to go to Savannah, Ga., to find a qualified contractor, he said. Brandhorst said the ideal scenario is an independent solar power system designed as part of the building. Retrofit systems work, but they are not as energy efficient. "If you are not using energy conservation as part of fundamental building, you don't need solar," he said. "You will just be wasting energy."

Solar energy, he said, is only as reliable as the sun. That makes it inappropriate for large-scale power generation in many areas. Still, he insisted it is perfect for a building or for local power generation.
