Going Solar

A Guide for Working Well with Local Contractors to Get You a Solar System that is Right for You

This guide is intended to help you navigate the process of going solar, from finding contractors, to getting quotes, to signing a contract, and dealing with issues along the way.

This can be helpful for any type of solar system you choose—roof-mounted, pole-mounted on your property, or built on a community solar farm further away—and for the type of financing you use—purchasing the system outright, financing it with a loan, or leasing a system. Being prepared can help avoid many headaches for you and for the contractor you work with. Take the time to do your homework to achieve:

✓ On schedule vs. Schedule disruption
✓ Good quality vs. Poor quality work
✓ Within budget vs. Major changes in cost
✓ Good contractor relationship vs. Disputes with contractors

D. Do Your Homework!

Use this guide as a companion to the SEIA Consumer Guide for Solar Power, which provides an excellent overview of considerations for the whole process, and which this document draws from. We also suggest using “Solar Tompkins Best Practices Standards”, a document you can find on www.solartompkins.org, which provides technical, ethical, and customer service standards that contractors should abide by. In addition, NYSERDA provides a “Step by Step Guide to Find and Prepare for an Installer” on its website.

At any point in time along the way if you have a question don’t hesitate to get in touch with us through our Energy Advising program. We’re here to help.
I. BEFORE GOING SOLAR

Get Your GreenBack always recommends doing energy efficiency first. You can reduce the amount of electricity you need by upgrading lighting and equipment, and if you heat with electricity, you can use less by insulating and sealing air leaks. This may end up reducing the number of solar panels you would need and the price of your project. We recommend getting a no-cost energy audit to learn more about reducing your home’s energy use. Find a local home performance contractor at www.getyourgreenback.org/energy-efficient-home.

II. CHOOSING A CONTRACTOR & GETTING QUOTES

You will likely be exploring solar installation types—roof-mounted, ground-mounted, or community solar farm—and financing options at the same time you are choosing a contractor. We have separated out these decisions for organizational purposes.

a. Choosing Your Type of System

You may already know you have a good roof for solar and will be taking a loan out to pay for it, and that’s great. Many people however may want to explore different siting options—including community solar farms—and different ways of paying for the panels, including the option of a monthly lease payment that can simply replace your current electrical bills. You will want to ask contractors for their advice on these choices, and what options they offer and recommend.

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b. Narrowing the Pool of Contractors

You will want to get quotes from at least two or three different contractors. It makes sense to spend some time choosing which ones to contact, in order to find a few you like and can trust. Here are some things to consider when choosing:

✓ Use Get Your GreenBack Contractor Partners who have agreed to a set of standards and good practices. Find a list at www.getyourgreenback.org/go-solar.
✓ Ask people you know who have had similar work done for recommendations
✓ Ask potential contractors for a set of references and follow up with all of them and ask if they were satisfied with the work.
✓ Ask contractors questions, such as:
  o How many solar jobs have you done?
  o How long has your company been in business for?
  o What experience do you have working with [your type] of installation? (e.g. type of roof, pole-mount, etc.)
  o Can you share with me examples of solar projects you have done?

¹ See www.getyourgreenback.org/financing for a list of local financing options
c. Getting Proposals

Some contractors may be able to generate an estimate based just on your historical electrical usage, current electricity rates, and images of your home available through online mapping tools. However, you will eventually want to get a full site visit where they can evaluate your roof or site and the amount of sun you receive. After the site visit, you should receive your quote within two weeks. We encourage you to go over the quote with the installer either on the phone or in person.

The proposal should include at least the following:

- Size of system, in kW and number of panels
- The location where the installation will take place
- Cost of system, including pricing details for any expected electrical, mechanical, or structural considerations that are beyond the basic scope.
- Type of equipment used (panels, inverters, etc.)
- Warranties for each piece of equipment
- Whether you will purchase the equipment, lease it, or have a power purchase arrangement

In addition, it should include

- A statement of available incentives and/or tax credits that you may be eligible for to reduce the overall cost of your project.
- At least one financing option for your project.

2 In addition, find a list of local financing options at www.getyourgreenbacktompkins.org/financing

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d. Review & Compare Proposals

- Do the proposals contain different purchase, lease or power-purchase arrangements?
- Who is responsible for obtaining and paying for any and all permits, inspections and approvals?
- How long are the panels and equipment warrantied for? How long do they warrantee the installation?
- Do the proposals include other equipment aside from the panels? Many companies offer online dashboards where you can see your solar production in real time, and over time. If this is important to you—and we recommend getting such a system—make sure you include this in your decision-making.

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2 In addition, find a list of local financing options at www.getyourgreenbacktompkins.org/financing
- Verify all the numbers used in the energy analysis and proposal – make sure the capacity of the panels match your current or expected electricity use.
- Verify you are eligible for any tax credits – check with an accountant or tax professional.
- Ask questions and make sure you understand the answers before you sign the contract. Don’t be afraid to ask again.

**e. Choosing a Contractor**
When evaluating the contractors and their proposals, you may find it useful to ask yourselves such questions as:

- Which system seems to best meet my home’s current and future needs?
- Which contractor do I feel most comfortable working with?

**III. Getting Work Done**

**a. Signing a Contract**
In addition to the scope of work, equipment specifications, equipment testing protocols and other standard contract features, here are some additional considerations you may wish to include, or consider including, in your contract:

- You may want to ask for a work schedule, especially if you have scheduling constraints which limit your time available
- Who is responsible for clean-up
- Process for dealing with changes, which are sometimes unavoidable. For example, if installing pole-mounted system, the contractor may find digging the trench for the wiring crosses other utilities and may require re-routing the trench. Deciding beforehand on a process for proposing and addressing these changes will help things go more smoothly.
- Communication protocol – establish the lead person for you to communicate with
- Do you need a building permit for the work? If so, who gets it and who pays for it?

**Remember that if it is not written in the contract it is not part of the contract.** Make sure any changes you discussed with the contractor get entered into a revised contract.

Aside from the contract, there will likely be other forms that you will have to fill out and sign in order to claim the various incentives available. The contractor should guide you through this process.

**b. Pre-Construction Meeting**
It is useful for you to hold a pre-construction meeting with your contractor, in order to go over the work scope and contract to make sure you are on the same page. In addition, you may want to specify any additional concerns such as:

- Where to park and store materials
- Which bathrooms to use
✓ You may want to review your main priorities in the project, scheduling, e.g., not destroying your lawn, cost, quality, etc., being aware that you probably can’t have all of them

c. During Construction
✓ Set aside some time each day to inspect the work they are doing and ask questions. Let them know you will be doing this. This will enable you to address issues as they come up, which is best for both you and the contractor.
✓ A little hospitality may go a long way in helping make the communications and work go smoothly. Why not provide some drinks and snacks?

d. Closeout
☐ Generate a “punch list” – a list of things that need to be finished in order to complete the work scope. Assume that the last 10% of work is the hardest. Don’t be afraid to withhold payment; 20% is reasonable.
☐ Test equipment to make sure each panel and inverter are working properly. It may take some time after the installation to get connected by NYSEG to the grid, when you will actually start using your solar power.

e. “True-Up” Date
At this point in time you should make a point of discussing with your contractor your “true-up” date. This is the day of the year when the utility does your solar accounting, adding up all the power you generated and subtracting the electricity you used, crediting you for extra power produced, or charging you for additional electricity used. Your default “true up” date is the day you got connected to the grid. However, that may not be the best time for you (for reasons your contractor can explain). Since you can only change your “true-up” date once, learn about when it makes most sense for you.

IV. After the Work is Done
Yay! You did it. You have a fine-looking and functional solar system that is powering your home. Now you should:

a. Share the good news.
If you appreciate the work of the contractor, why not write up a positive review on their site, send them a note, and post something on your Facebook page? Let them know you will be happy to do this. Talk it up with your friends, family and neighbors. People are much more likely to explore solar if they hear about their peers’ positive experiences. How about organizing a solar party to celebrate?

Get Your GreenBack would be happy to share your story through our newsletter and other media. Please get in touch with us if interested in this.

b. Quality Control & Dispute Resolution
While most solar installations are straight-forward and issue-free, here are some things you can do if you have concerns about the work.
☐ The first and best step is to call your contractor and discuss your concerns with them. They should be able to address your concerns, returning if necessary to your home to do so.

☐ If you still feel like you need third-party advise, you may call Get Your GreenBack and speak with an Energy Advisor, who may be able to help mediate a discussion with the contractor.

☐ If you still feel unsatisfied with the work, you can file a complaint:
  ✓ For companies that are certified by SEIA there is a formal process for doing so.
  ✓ You can file complaints with NYSEDA, the Better Business Bureau, and if you believe there has been a breach of contract you can seek legal resource. Of course, the latter should only be done in extreme cases of gross negligence or fraud.

**Disclaimer**

This guide is intended as a resource to help you gather useful information necessary to make a good decision with regards to solar installations, and to encourage a positive interaction with local installers. However, no process is foolproof. While Get Your GreenBack Tompkins is happy to provide information to help with decision-making, we can’t accept liability for decisions made or contracts signed. Please proceed with the diligence and care required of any significant decision that will impact your finances and your home.