

Community Solar: Why Is It A Thing? What Is It? And What Isn't It?

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Why Community Solar?

Recently, I was asked why Community Solar was “a thing”. Consumers are being solicited with Community Solar offers through social media, email, and junk mail. Why should they pay attention?

My company subscribes National Grid customers to Community Solar farms, so I have a keen interest in answering this question. I think the most effective path forward for my industry is through transparency and consumer clarity. I write this because I believe there is a clear lack of both.

In New York, we have what I call “The Big Lift”. This is to convert our electric grid to renewable energy sources and away from fossil fuels like natural gas. The target goals are 70% renewable energy-sourced electricity by 2030, and 100% decarbonization of the grid by 2040.

New York burns natural gas not just for heating, we also burn it to produce approximately 40% of our electricity use. In 2018, New York was the sixth-largest importer of natural gas of all U.S. States, even with our significant hydroelectric and nuclear resources. We all know the burning of natural gas generates CO2 emissions, which settled science clearly shows is heating up our planet.

In 2019, New York State passed the Community Leadership and Climate Protection Act (CLCPA), the nation’s most ambitious climate targets legislation, following years of policy and regulatory development of the Reforming Our Energy Vision (REV) initiative to create a cleaner, more resilient, and affordable energy system for all New Yorkers. In doing so, our state government has attracted significant private sector investment interest, and dollars, to build solar farms that include a direct consumer benefit.

Okay, we have scratched the surface of the Why. Next is the “What Is It” part, which I distilled down to a basic primer of a complex story. I do enjoy discussing this topic, so call or email me if you have questions. But all you really need to know about Community Solar is what follows.

What is Community Solar?

Community Solar is consumer participation in a solar farm. The most common type of solar farm in New York is a subscription-based Community Solar farm. The farm owners offer subscriptions to utility account holders for a proportionate share of the farm’s solar production credits, based on the subscriber’s annual kWh usage. The farm owners provide subscribers 10% of the dollar value of their allocated share as a credit on their monthly electricity bill. This may sound complicated, but it is quite basic in practice.

A simpler way to describe this is that farm owners offer subscribers a share of the farms profits for free, but that is hard to accept. Why would farm owners do this after all their expense and hard work to build and operate a solar farm?



Our electric grid is an on-demand service. You flip a switch and expect an immediate response, therefore there must always be enough electricity produced to meet real-time demand. Adding new sources of electricity production to the grid is not needed if we already have enough. This is where you, the consumer, comes in. We need you to replace our existing supply with a cleaner choice.

By subscribing to a Community Solar farm, you choose to have the electricity you use come from clean solar energy. With a fully subscribed farm, the farm owner will interconnect to the grid and replace burned gas with clean solar. You become a necessary partner with the farm owner, and collectively we all benefit. This is what Community Solar is.

What Isn't Community Solar?

To be honest, this section is a bit self-serving. After all, I do have a savings product to give away. More importantly, this is about consumer choice. The practical, policy and regulatory complexities of this relatively new industry are still evolving, but active participation should remain simple for the consumers we need to succeed.

Community Solar is not just getting your electricity directly from a solar farm, it is active participation in the rebuilding of our electric grid using clean electricity and smart technology. It is not about "What's in it for me?", it is about all New Yorkers benefitting together. And it is not shopping for the best deal or waiting for a better offer. Through regulation, all farms offer essentially the same benefit, for the life of the farm. Savings begin on a first-come, first-serve basis, and today's subscription incentives will go away.

Community Solar in New York is not about receiving two bills, one from your utility that you don't pay, then another bill from your farm that you do pay. You should only get one bill. The one from your utility, with your credit already applied.

Community Solar is not providing credit card information to your subscriber. It is not providing power of attorney over your utility account relationship to a third party. And it is not about switching your supplier.

Let's keep this simple. You have a long-term savings opportunity available to you, and the sooner you subscribe, the sooner your savings will start. As a valued consumer partner, you don't need unknowledgeable call-center representatives advising you or street hustlers scamming you. Call me and let's talk. Go to www.on-renewables.com to get more information. And subscribe online today with your local, and locally-known, New York Community Solar partner.