

Solar solutions

Company provides alternative installations for alternative energy

By MARC LUTZ
Business Journal Editor
 mlutz@cvbizjournal.com

JACKSON—In the industry's early days, solar panels needed a large area to draw as much power from the sun as possible. Nowadays, customers with minimal space can utilize the alternative energy source without the need for an expansive rooftop.

"When it comes to alternatives to [rooftop installations], places like schools and libraries are taking advantage of solar on carports," said Steve Dollens, owner of SunnyCal Solar in Jackson and Lathrop. The company began 18 years ago as part of Dollens Electric, then split off as the solar aspect grew.

SunnyCal's focus became alternative installation designs when customers didn't have the necessary space. Ground installations work for many, but for some, carport installations have become ideal.

"I would say that probably a little more than 50 percent of residential customers purchase [the carports] to park RVs or travel trailers under," Dollens said. Long winters of non-use can deplete a vehicle's battery, and the solar panels are a solution that can help keep it charged without drawing from a public utility. "In some cases, the panels are used to save a customer's \$100,000-plus toy."

But it's not just high-end recreational vehicles that are being parked under the carports.

"Some people install the structures out in their field and store hay under them," said Becky Dollens, office manager for SunnyCal Solar.

In one case, a historical home in San Jose, the carport was an ideal solution.

"They can't put panels on the house because it's a historical house," Becky Dollens said.

The carport made it possible to provide the structure with modern solar power without compromising the integrity of the



MARC LUTZ/CVBJ

Carports with solar installations are becoming increasingly attractive to people with limited space to dedicate to the panels.

historical aspect of the home.

SunnyCal began operating in 2006 as part of Dollens Electric. It was split off on its own when the business increased. Though it began at the height of the recession, Steven Dollens said they didn't notice a downward trend.

"We didn't have an appreciation for up or down, it was all just up," Steven Dollens said. "It's been a pretty solid business throughout the years."

The company, which provides not only sales, but design, construction, maintenance and repair of solar structures, is part of a growing trend for alternative energies.

As the requirements for California's energy consumption evolve through Title 24, Steven Dollens said he believes it will place even more emphasis on solar, requiring residential structures to have some form of solar installation.

Most solar companies in the region agree there's plenty of work for all the competition to thrive.

"There's a lot of business; enough for everybody," Steve Dollens said. "I think there's a long future ahead for solar, no doubt about that."

Part of SunnyCal's goal is to not only build a customer base, but a knowledgeable one. Customers should understand their energy consumption needs, Steve Dollens said. He pointed out that many customers will request a size they believe will work, when—at looking through their historical energy-consumption trends—it will not.

"Even though we size it just right, they might end up using more than they did in the past," Steven Dollens said. "If they install a system that's too small, they could end up with a pretty substantial bill at the end of the year."

That being the case, Steven Dollens said the company tries to install a larger solar array than a customer's historical data would require.

One of the advantages of

adding solar to a home is that it can keep a customer from paying more and more for electrical rates. Though some don't save a lot, they do keep from paying those increasing rates.

"At least they've stepped off the escalator of PG&E or SMUD or whomever it is," Steve Dollens said.

The most problematic challenge SunnyCal faces is uneven surfaces, he said.

"With regard to carports, the most important thing from a customer perspective, the place has to be a suitable level and it has to be robust to receive [the carport]," Steve Dollens said. "In a side yard, the terrain is going to be uneven. On a driveway, a place that's heavily traveled, it will be a reasonable level."

Still, he said, SunnyCal will use just about any approach necessary to get the job done.

"We have a saying in the solar industry: if it doesn't move, we'll screw a solar panel in it," Steven Dollens said. **CV**