

# Austin Energy cutting rebates for solar panels

Commercial and nonprofit efforts won't get any money

By Marty Toohey

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Austin Energy announced Wednesday that it is cutting back on rebates offered to homeowners for installing solar panels and will suspend them entirely for businesses and nonprofits until January.

The popular solar rebate program has attracted more applications than Austin Energy can pay for, utility officials say. Meanwhile, they say, with the price of solar technology dropping, the city does not have to cover as much of the cost to entice people to buy solar arrays.

Austin Energy has budgeted \$4 million for solar rebates during the current budget year, which starts today. But the utility has already committed \$3.3 million of that to 110 projects.

Utility Vice President Karl Rabago said that an additional 135 applications have been filed since the start of September, worth an additional \$4.5 million.

Under the change announced Wednesday, Austin Energy will be turning down all those 135 pending applications. Starting Nov. 1, the homeowners whose applications were turned down can reapply but will be eligible for a smaller rebate. The city had been willing to cover about two-thirds of the cost; it will now cover about one-half.

Solar advocates said the changes caught

them off-guard and could damage the burgeoning local industry. Residents in the Mueller neighborhood looking to install solar panels said they will probably scuttle their plans. St. Luke Episcopal Church in Clarksville has put its solar plans on hold and will not go forward with them unless Austin Energy offers rebates to nonprofits, said Marianne Dorman, a church deacon.

Rabago pledged to restore some business and nonprofit rebates by January.

Austin Energy has committed to helping the local solar industry as part of larger city priorities and is proposing that the city get 3 percent of its electricity from solar by 2020, as opposed to the negligible share produced by solar now.

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