

Visalia Times-Delta

Self-Help goes solar

By Luis Hernandez

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Tulare's Sandra Luna said she is looking forward to the savings on her electricity bill when the solar power system installed in her home kicks into production.

"For us, it will be a great benefit," she said. "It's very important to save."

And of course, there's also the benefit for the environment.

"We are going to be helping the environment as well," she said. "We are going to be using the power of the sun."

Luna's home is one of 12 houses at a northwest Tulare neighborhood receiving a solar power system from GRID Alternatives, the non-profit solar power system installer whose Central California office was installing its 1,000 system.

The solar power systems for the homes, located at a subdivision built by Self-Help Enterprises, are possible thanks to a three-way partnership among NeighborWorks America, Self-Help Enterprises and GRID Alternatives. Because of the grants and match from Self-Help, the power systems are being installed at almost no cost to the homeowners.

Tom Esqueda, regional director for GRID Alternatives Central California, said the solar power system installed will mean, on the average, a 75 percent saving in electricity cost. Using a monthly bill of \$100, the residents with solar systems will pay \$25 monthly.

"That's more money for the family budget," he said.

The systems installed are 3.1 kilowatt, typical for homes in the neighborhood.

Esqueda, whose office has installed solar power systems throughout the Central Valley, said at some homes the electricity savings are as high as 90 percent.

"It makes the home more affordable," said Felipe Casas, manager of Self-Help Enterprise Housing.

The solar power system is just an additional money-saving feature the homes have.

Casas said the homes, built at a neighborhood just north of Heritage School, also have power-efficient appliances and light fixtures.

"It's all about sustainability," said Sonia Sanchez, a spokesperson with Self-Help Enterprises.

Luna said she and her family, including her husband and four children, moved into their home in July. Even with a new home, the electricity bill was high during the hot summer months. She said she expects a lower bill next summer.

Esqueda said the system in Luna's home will likely start working within three months. In total, GRID Alternatives is installing 12 systems at the subdivision. The families were picked based on annual income, Casas said. Esqueda said GRID Alternatives and Self-Help Enterprises are natural partners in home-improvement projects as they both work with low-income families.

With the one installed at Luna's home, it makes eight solar power systems installed at the neighborhood. Esqueda said the remaining systems will be installed within a month.

Based in Visalia, Self-Help Enterprises has house-building projects around the county and throughout Central California.