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As solar panels gain acceptance and reach more rooftops across Rhode Island, it helps to again weigh the costs and benefits.

According to [EnergySage](#), a federally funded solar research, marketing and price-comparison firm, the costs for solar panels are dropping.

A few recent statistics about Rhode Island from EnergySage and the [Solar Energy Industries Association](#):

About 4,000 homes are powered by solar.

The cost of solar per watt has fallen 55 percent in the past five years.

The average cost per residential solar system, after incentives, is \$12,417.

The payback on investment is about eight years.

Nationally, the amount of solar installed by megawatt is up 8 percent from the second quarter of last year. However, residential solar is down 17 percent. In Massachusetts, residential solar dropped 60 percent for the quarter, while utility-scale solar increased 70 percent.

Experts suspect the drop in residential solar is driven by installers focusing on more profitable commercial and utility systems. Uncertainty about renewable-energy incentives in Washington, D.C., is also a concern.

A town-by-town solar-discount program known as [Solarize](#) is underway in Cranston and Charlestown. Through the program, home and business owners who don't want to shop around for solar installers receive a group discount from a single installer that serves the entire community. As more customers sign up, the price for installation drops. Since it launched in 2014, Solarize has received 479 contracts for new solar systems in 12 Rhode Island communities.



As more Solarize customers sign up, the price for installation drops. (Tim Faulkner/ecoRI News)

Alan Houghton of Cranston installed solar panels on his house three years ago. He's a volunteer "solar ambassador" for Solarize. During a recent neighborhood solar drive, Houghton listed his reasons for going solar. Solar, he said, makes the most sense for the wallet and the environment. He recommended installing solar after having energy-efficiency audit done. A home should also be well insulated with efficient heating and cooling systems.

Rhode Island offers [free home energy audits](#) through National Grid. For a list of state and federal solar incentives, [click here](#).