

The Daily Camera

Homeowners save 'orphan' panels 1970s-era solar technology heats water once again

By Emily Cooper, For the Camera
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Standing on a roof on another scorching July day, a solar technology worker looked up at the 150-pound solar panel swinging over his head. He waved his arms, and the crane operator expertly lowered the panel into place.

The workers reinstalled panels Friday on five homes in the Pawnee Meadows development in Boulder. With the help of a new cost-sharing program offered by Boulder's Center for ReSource Conservation, area homeowners now have a chance to get their 25-year-old solar thermal panels up and running.

"This is a program that we've sort of had on the wish list for a while," said Amy Ellsworth, the center's energy program director.

Funding came through when Boulder County started its "Drop in the Bucket" campaign, encouraging homeowners to donate their TABOR property tax refunds to area nonprofits. The Center for ReSource Conservation received \$20,000 from the campaign, all of which will go toward refurbishing "orphan" solar panels.

Unlike newer solar technologies, solar thermal panels do not create electricity. By heating the house's water with solar energy, however, they can save as much as 80 percent of the energy that would have been used to make hot water.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, many homeowners were spurred by President Carter's solar energy incentives to install solar thermal panels on their homes. The Center for ReSource Conservation estimates 1,200 rooftop units were installed in Boulder County, and 1,000 of them are still there.

Over the years, as houses changed owners, many panels fell into disrepair. The center set up its "orphan solar program" to get those systems running again, by flushing tubes inside the panels and sometimes replacing the control box.

"The payback is pretty good," Ellsworth said.

Although new solar thermal systems cost about \$5,000 to \$6,000, it usually costs less than \$1,000 to refurbish an older system, Ellsworth said. With the center paying half of that amount up to \$500, homeowners quickly recover their share of the costs from the money they save heating their water with solar energy.

The center estimates a solar thermal system will save a family of four \$370 to \$500 per year in energy costs.

Mary and Bob Dill had their panels reinstalled Friday. Mary Dill said she and her husband moved into their house in 1997, in part because of the solar panels.

"It just doesn't make sense to keep relying on other countries for our energy," she said.



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