

A Bumpy Road

Location

127 Clay Street

Installation Date

July 2012

Motivation

To reduce my carbon footprint and save money in the process. When the Cambridge Energy Alliance notified me of a \$2,000 grant, adding to other available grants and tax credits, it became possible for me to spend about \$2000 for a system that would have cost \$8,000 without incentives.

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Project Goal

Heat my water with the sun as much as possible, with the new electric water heater as back-up on cloudy days.

Installation Process

I have had many troubles with the solar hot water system. I deserve part of the blame, mainly due to an inadequately conducted search for an installer. Of the companies I called, only Charles Nadel/Advanced Energy Systems Development was installing solar hot water systems at private residences. I unwisely went with Mr. Nadel instead of continuing my search.

By all accounts, Mr. Nadel installed the system properly. But a problem arose, again one for which I'm partly to blame. Mr. Nadel told me that either his electrician could do the electrical work for \$350 or I could hire one of my choosing. I opted for the latter, and the electrician I chose failed to disconnect the lower heating coil as instructed. As a result, I started heating my water with electricity rather than the sun.

As I watched my utilities bills skyrocket, Mr. Nadel and other solar energy technicians examined the system. Only after four months did Mr. Nadel figure out the problem. I had the electrician disconnect the lower heating coil. However, the other heating coil was damaged, meaning I now had no electrical back-up at all. After numerous failed diagnoses, Mr. Nadel replaced the coil under warranty.

Still, the back-up electric water heater wasn't sufficient. Mr. Nadel recommended turning up the thermostat on the upper heating coil. I did so, to little effect. Eventually, Mr. Nadel stopped responding to my pleas for assistance. Fortunately, an expert on water heaters helped me get the system up and running. The solar aspect of the system has been excellent from the start, but the back-up is now, after so much trouble, adequate at best.

“Avoid my mistakes, and do due diligence while searching for an installer...The Cambridge Energy Alliance and Energy Sage are highly recommended resources. Use them!”

Lessons Learned

I am wary about recommending a solar water heater, given the difficulties I've had with mine. If you do decide to purchase one, avoid my mistakes and do due diligence while searching for an installer. My failure to get two or three bids was – well – pretty stupid. The Cambridge Energy Alliance (Meghan Shaw) and Energy Sage (John Gingrich) are highly recommended resources; they are knowledgeable, accessible, and on your side. Use them!