

The Light Stuff

Gulf City Solar hopes to have its moment in the sun.

As area operations director for Coconut Point mall in Estero, John Kennedy has a lot of ground to cover each day. So when he drives around the shopping center in his golf cart, he's thankful that he works in the Sunshine State.

That's because his ride is outfitted with a solar kit from Gulf City Solar, which eliminates the need to plug the vehicle into an electrical outlet overnight. Now, the sun charges the cart's battery throughout the day, whether Kennedy's cruising through the property or parked in front of one of the site's retailers.

"It works the same as the other carts we have here, and it saves us energy and money," says Kennedy. "And it's gotten quite a bit of a reaction. A lot of people stop and ask me what I think of it and how it rides."

Every time someone asks Kennedy to shed some light on the product, Gulf City Solar exposes one more person to its business. And that's important in these parts. Even though the two-year-old Bonita Springs-based company is located in a state known for its beautiful weather, it's found that Floridians and other Americans have been slower to embrace solar energy than denizens of Europe, from which company co-founder, William P. Heckenstaller, and its executive vice president of sales and marketing, Hans Holzmann, originally hail.

"There is so much happening with solar in Europe and not as much happening here," says Holzmann. One reason why, according to Holzmann:

European governments tend to do more to encourage citizens to make the solar switch through subsidies and other incentives.

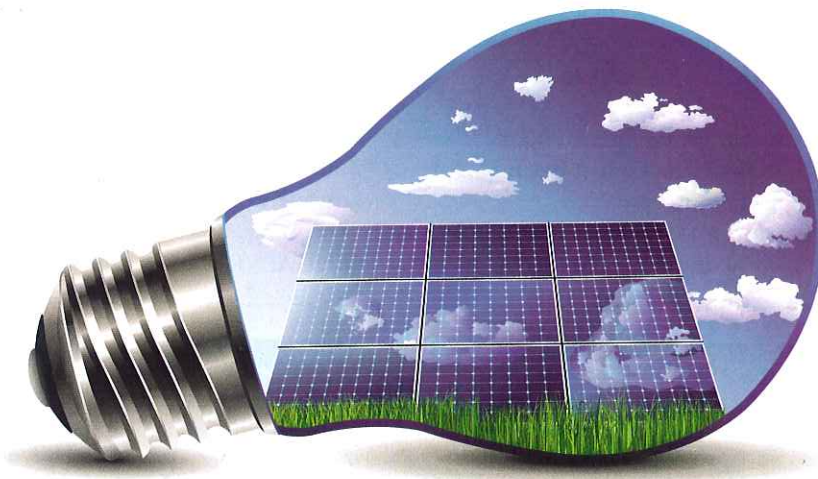
Gulf City Solar believes there's a great market for its products here, but it has to work a little harder to get potential customers to warm up to them. One thing the company can tout is the fact that it's making it easier for people to harness the sun's energy.

Its solar conversion kits for electric golf carts, for example, bypass the heavy glass panels people typically think of when they hear solar power. Instead, the kits use a thin, lightweight panel that sticks to the roof of the cart and is connected to the battery by a cable.

"When this came along, the technology

was interesting," says Walt McMahon, executive vice president of Lakeland-based Golf Ventures, the exclusive distributor of the solar kits. "This panel, for the average golf cart, weighs less than 10 pounds. Traditionally, to provide the same amount of performance, you would need a glass panel that weighs close to 70 pounds."

In addition to the golf-cart kits, Gulf City Solar has also developed a solar-powered generator that's about the size of a carry-on suitcase and quieter than its gas-powered counterpart. And the company is starting to work on solar-powered aeration systems. But for now, it's focusing most of its efforts on getting golf courses and other golf-cart users to realize the benefits of using



LIGHTING THE WAY: Gulf City Solar wants to change Southwest Florida's mind on solar power.

one of the state's most abundant natural resources. Partnering with Golf Ventures, which already works with 850 Florida courses, has helped it make some inroads.

"We've had a tremendous amount of interest," says McMahon of the solar kits, which first hit the market last summer. "We've done demos at 15 courses so far, and we're in negotiations with three right now to make the conversion." Kennedy also plans to install solar kits on Coconut Point's four other golf carts when it's time to replace their batteries.

If a golf club installs the kit on 50 carts, it can achieve a net savings of \$60,000 to \$90,000 in three years.

Kits range in price from \$1,550 to \$2,250, depending on the cart model and battery type. According to Gulf City Solar, customers should recoup their investment in under two years. "If a golf club installs the kit on 50 carts, it can achieve a net savings of \$60,000 to \$90,000 in the first three years," says Holzmann. "It's probably one of the major savings opportunities for golf courses nowadays."

And what business wouldn't want to boost its budget in the current economic climate? But even the chance to cut costs sometimes doesn't fully convince customers.

"One of the main obstacles for us to overcome is the fact that people don't believe it," says Holzmann. "There has been so much solar out there; they've had glass tops for golf carts, and other flexible panels have been tried. But they just all fall short. We have to go through a lot of proving. We saw that at Coconut Point; it took about a month to prove to them that it works. But we know it has to be done." **gB**

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