

Selecting a Solar Contractor



Selecting a contractor to install a solar energy system on your home doesn't have to be difficult – as long as you ask the right questions, provide the right information, and compare bids based on similar system parameters.

HOW DO I CHOOSE AMONG SOLAR PROVIDERS?

You may need to consult with a couple of solar professionals initially to determine which of the solar technologies best suit your needs (learn more from Skinny on “Solar Thermal” “PV” and “Geothermal”). You can also call the Center for ReSource Conservation with questions about these systems (303.999.3820).

Start with a list of prospective solar contractors (see “Learn More” on page 2). Travel might add to system and maintenance costs, so consider local contractors first.

The CRC recommends homeowners get more than one bid, making sure they are based on the same system parameters to ensure practical comparison. A good solar contractor will be able to estimate what size solar thermal or electric system is appropriate for your home and the energy savings and environmental benefits it will provide. Request that bids include the total installed cost and an itemized breakdown for equipment, labor, permits, taxes and other costs. Bids should clearly state the quantity, make and model of the equipment, warranty and after sales service policies, the system's maximum generating capacity and an estimate of its annual energy production. To aid a prospective contractor, provide them with a year's worth of energy bills to estimate your electricity or energy needs.

Most contractors will also provide details on any applicable financial incentives (rebates and/or tax credits) and will either deduct the rebate amount from the final bill or help homeowners to prepare and submit paperwork. Learn more about incentives from Skinny on “Federal” and “Local” Incentives.

HOW DO I CHOOSE AMONG COMPETING BIDS?

You can evaluate bids in a number of ways: costs, service warranties, customer service, handling of rebates, availability, years of experience or other qualifications. Price should not be your only consideration and the lowest cost bid is not necessarily the best one. While not always true, a low bid could be a sign of inexperience. The following are general questions to ask to help you decide between solar contractors.

Q: How many years of experience does the contractor have installing solar energy systems?

Obviously, the more experience the better. A number of companies have started up in Colorado in the past couple years to meet growing consumer demand, so the age of the company is not as important as the experience of individual installers. Ask for the number of years key employees have worked installing solar systems or the number of systems they've installed.

Q: Can the company provide references from previous customers?

Request a list of past customers who can provide references. The ultimate measure of success for any company is customer satisfaction. Ask references to provide feedback on customer service aspects that are most important to you such as responsiveness, handling of unforeseen problems, courteousness, value for the service delivered, showing up on time for appointments, and so on.

Q: Is the company properly insured and qualified?

Solar energy systems should be installed by an experienced, qualified and insured contractor. Few local jurisdictions in Colorado require solar installers to be licensed, although much of the installation of a

photovoltaic system must be done by a licensed electrician. Currently, the cities of Boulder and Denver do not require solar contractors to have a specialty license. Additional things to consider include:

- ☀ Solar electric (PV) contractors may have staff that are certified by the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP), and should have a Master Electrician on staff or under contract.
- ☀ Solar thermal contractors are not required to be Master Plumbers.
- ☀ Some contractors are COSEIA certified but not all qualified solar contractors are.
- ☀ Ask the system manufacturer to verify that the installer has experience and/or training necessary to install the system properly.
- ☀ Ask for the company's project portfolio or a list of recent projects in the area.
- ☀ Most contractors offer a standard warranty on their service or installation ranging from 1-2 years or longer.

Q: (For solar thermal contractors) Has the company installed solar thermal systems for water, pool, or space heating? What sizes?

Choose a company that has experience installing and servicing the type of system you want. Solar thermal systems come in a range of configurations and may use water, glycol, or air as the heat collection medium. Most contractors will specialize in a particular type of system that they have worked with and can recommend. But a good contractor can discuss the pros and cons of each.

*Q: (For solar Photovoltaic contractors) Does the company assist with the Xcel Energy's Solar*Rewards rebate process?*

Xcel Energy currently offers residential customers a rebate of \$4.50/watt for solar electric (PV) systems less than 10 kW in size. Most PV contractors take responsibility for securing the rebates and factor it into the cost estimate, reducing the up-front system cost, saving the customer time and potential frustration.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK SOLAR CONTRACTORS:

- ☀ Why should I choose to work with the company and/or what advantages does it have over others?
- ☀ Why did you choose to use the particular equipment specified for my system?
- ☀ What are the warranty and after-sales service policies?
- ☀ What are the payment schedule, terms and conditions?
- ☀ How quickly can the company install my system and/or is there a lead-time for my installation?
- ☀ How many systems has the company installed in the past month? In the past year?
- ☀ Has the company installed any systems in my area or neighborhood?
- ☀ How long are the prices valid and what if equipment prices increase before my system is installed?
- ☀ How can you reassure me that your business will be around for the long-run (to honor warranties) and won't go out of business?

LEARN MORE

Colorado Solar Energy Industries Association (COSEIA)

<http://www.coseia.org/newsite/index.php?id=55>

How to select a Solar Contractor

List of Boulder/Denver contractors

www.conservationcenter.org/e_contractors.htm

List of contractors throughout Colorado

www.coseia.org/newsite/index.php?id=102