

## ***Solar power delivers many benefits to Savoir Faire Stables.***

*by Kim F. Miller*

Arena roof solar panels are saving Savoir Faire Stables a boatload of money, and their benefit to the boarding and training facility began well before that. Located in San Diego County's San Marcos, Savoir Faire is owned by three sisters: dressage trainer Sandra Burns-Gardner; equine rehabilitation specialist, Jeanne Burns; and Kathy Schack. The horsewomen were contemplating a covered arena so they and their clients could ride every day, regardless of rain or sizzling summer heat.



Like a lot of horse property owners, however, the prospect of undergoing the County permitting process was daunting. Fortunately, they were considering the new arena shortly after San Diego County implemented a greatly simplified process for zoning properties that house horse-related businesses. They also had the good fortune to connect with James Reeve.

James is neither a horse guy nor a zoning/permitting guy. The owner of Newport Power in San Clemente is a solar power expert. When he was contracted to put solar panels on the roof of one of the sisters' homes, James learned of their hopes and permitting concerns regarding a covered arena. He suggested solar panels as a means of helping that endeavor, as a cost-saver and as something the County would view favorably in the permitting application phase.

"In order to get that arena built, they needed to have the property designated correctly," explains James. The idea of having County officials visit and examine their property is one that strikes fear into the hearts of many, James observes. But neglecting proper permitting is risky

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business. For example, operating a horse business on property permitted for residential use may nullify the protection of insurance policies. Contrary to what some believe, having a business license does not confer the County's permission to operate a commercial endeavor on land not zoned for it.

### **Well-Kept Secret: Permits Are Possible**

Even with the changes that went into effect in 2013, the permitting process in San Diego is not easy. Yet, James stresses that it's definitely doable and solar power can help.

Prior to the new rules, most commercial equestrian properties had to have a Major Use Permit, which requires extensive expense, time and jumping through hoops. (An MUP is still required for properties with 100 or more horses.) San Diego County's new zoning has three tiers of permitting for "horse stables," defined as properties that keep horses beyond those owned by the property's owner. The tiers are based on the number of horses per acre, aka "the intensity of the equine operation in the area." With its 26-stall barn, Savoir Faire fit the Tier 2 profile of having fewer than 50 horses on site.



In the last three years, Newport Power helped three clients get appropriate County permits for their horse stable and James is aware of two other sites that were green-lighted in that time frame. The company is a "General A engineering contractor that specializes in solar projects, thus we are licensed to build carports, arenas, as well as solar," James explains. That's distinct from the many solar installers who are only licensed for residential work. In two of the three cases Newport Power is involved with, realtors sought out the company's help with the permitting process. Along with safety and peace of mind, having the right permitting significantly increases property value, James notes.

James views San Diego County's new regulations as evidence that the County wants to help horse owners and preserve land for equestrian use. "The County was concerned that developers were coming out and doing infill," he explains. "The new regulations represent the

County supporting horse property, but it seems like the owners of horse properties are the only people who haven't been notified about it."

The permitting process requires practices and plans that owners should have in place anyway, James asserts. Along with defining access to water, manure removal methods and drainage engineering, written plans for handling emergencies are required.

The Savoir Faire team embarked on the permitting process at the same time they sought a permit for the covered arena: In fact, they needed the permit to proceed with the arena. Adding a solar component "very much helped" get the County's approval for the covered arena, James notes.

For one thing, solar projects are exempt from many requirements that apply to other construction. The safety aspect of professionally installed solar energy is attractive to County inspectors, James notes. That's especially true when compared with jury-rigged power set-ups are often found in rural properties with unpermitted structures.

### **Solar Economics**

The 120 panels that cover the south exposure side of Savoir Faire's covered arena generate plenty of power for the equestrian program, and for one of two residences on the property. Energy bills that once were \$25,000 a year, largely from the stable's requirements, dropped to \$900 a year.

Tax incentives add further cost savings. Under tax laws in play when Savoir Faire completed the project in 2015, they qualified for a tax credit equaling 30 percent of the gross cost of the project, including permitting fees. Savoir Faire's total cost, including the arena and other small projects, was \$160,000. That resulted in a \$48,242 federal tax credit; plus \$14,472 in California state depreciation and \$47,838 in federal depreciation, spread over five years. "Their net cost was \$50,000 after depreciation," James details. Add to that the following two years of \$24,000 per year savings on the electricity bill and the system has already virtually returned its investment. The tax advantages are a little different under this year's new tax laws, but still substantial, including the option of claiming all depreciation in the first year.

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Reducing their business' environmental footprint is an additional plus for the Savoir Faire owners.

For residential or commercial applications, a \$500 average monthly electricity bill is the point at which a switch to solar makes sense, James explains. Stables, storage structures and carports are among the buildings that lend themselves to solar panel installations, and there are "ground-mount" options, too. Hillsides and other patches of land that are not suitable for equestrian use are ideal locations for solar panels.

With summer on the way, the Savoir Faire family is grateful to be shielded from the sun by their covered arena, while simultaneously harnessing its power to drastically reduce the electricity bill and making a green hoofprint for low environmental impact.