



- Special to the Daily / Jon Harrington

## Summit County: Finding space for solar gardens

County, Breck push forward with plans for two big community solar gardens

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Summit County residents may see solar arrays springing up in Breckenridge in the near future, as the county and the town are both in talks for large community solar gardens. The trick will be deciding where to put them.

A groundbreaking concept in renewable energy nationwide, solar gardens allow subscribers (essentially individuals or businesses in the county interested in lowering their energy costs) to buy solar arrays in a community garden, which will be used to offset their own energy consumption.

“It is something that’s very cutting edge nationally,” said Lauren Martindale, a project development director for the Clean Energy Collective (CEC), the organization leading the solar-garden projects. “There are very few projects like this in the whole country.”

What makes the CEC gardens unique is that they allow subscribers to buy – not just lease – and, if they choose, to resell watts in the garden and use the energy to power homes and businesses that may be across the county from the actual panels.

“A lot of aspects of this project are new,” Breckenridge finance director Brian Waldes said. “We’re allowed to put this remote array in to offset meters elsewhere in the county. Here’s this opportunity to put in a very large garden and spread the benefits, not just throughout Breckenridge, but throughout the whole county.”

Both Breckenridge and the county are thinking big. Each is in talks with CEC to present proposals for two separate gardens – one 500 kilowatts and the other as big as 2 megawatts – to Xcel Engery as soon as the utility begins accepting applications.

Together, the projects, if approved, would represent more than a third of the total 6-megawatt program allocation Xcel will release statewide for an entire year.

The gardens would be owned by CEC, though the town and county might buy significant percentages of the arrays in each garden and Breck might also provide the land.

Both gardens would make solar available for anyone in the county to purchase.

### Space for solar

The challenge now is location.

The gardens require significant amounts of space (over three acres for the county project and approximately 10 for the Breckenridge garden) and must be located on large, fairly flat parcels of land with good sun exposure.

The county initially honed in on the landfill property off Highway 6 as a potential plot for its 500-kilowatt garden, but property restrictions from the U.S. Forest Service that would likely take some time to overcome caused officials to look to the Stilson property in Breckenridge instead.

“We’d look at the landfill perhaps as a second site in the next round of applications for Xcel,” asst. county manager Scott Vargo said.

Breckenridge, though still in discussions on the project, is considering the McCain property, a town-owned

parcel located on the north side of town on Airport Road, as a potential solar garden site.

“The town’s portion is that we’re giving the land,” Waldes said. “There’s no financial commitment at this point. We’ve told them to go ahead and come back with something that’s favorable for the town and if it works financially for us, we’ll go with it.”

The town council will vet the McCain property as a potential location at its work session Nov. 8. The town does not have another piece of land that would be big enough for the envisioned garden, but there have also been murmurs for years of using the parcel for a town reservoir. Aesthetics have also been a major consideration for Breck residents in considering solar projects in the past.

“There are people that think a solar garden is beautiful,” Breckenridge spokeswoman Kim Dykstra-DiLallo said. “There are others that don’t feel solar panels are the most attractive things in the world. Before you move forward with something that permanent, the council wants to look at all sides of it.”

Breckenridge residents have expressed both support and opposition to the possibility of a solar garden on the McCain property.

#### **How it works**

The solar gardens planned for Summit County will likely allow subscribers to purchase solar at a cost of roughly \$3-\$3.50 per watt with a minimum required purchase of one kilowatt for about \$3,000-\$3,500, CEC estimates. Actual rates will not be determined until Xcel accepts applications.

At the anticipated rates, however, CEC expects subscribers to see a full payback in the form of net metering credits in 10-15 years, with a possible return on investment of 6-7 percent annually and 700 percent over the lifetime of the arrays.

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