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NEWS

Community solar farm coming to region

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Solar energy project planned for Paradox Valley

**By Kathrine Warren
Staff Reporter**

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The San Miguel Power Association is close to breaking ground on a community-based solar farm in the Paradox Valley. The hope is that it will be fully operational by next summer.

In September, SMPA, the region's cooperative power company, signed on with Carbondale's Clean Energy Collective to develop and build a solar facility. The project is now going full steam ahead with ground breaking tentatively scheduled for February.

"It's going to be really great," said Becky Mashburn, SMPA's communications executive.

The Solar Community Project will allow SMPA customers to purchase their own solar panels in exchange for rebates on their bills that reflect how much energy the panel produces. Mashburn said each panel could generate roughly \$45 worth of energy annually per customer.

The price of a panel has not yet been set, but she estimates it will be between \$600 and \$800. The project is slated to include nearly 5,000 panels that SMPA customers can purchase.

SMPA pursued this project after efforts to build a solar facility in Ouray County fell through last year.

Community solar projects, or solar gardens, open the option of solar power to a wide array of people compared to private solar installations. Renters or people who live in places that don't receive much sunlight can still tap into the sun's rays for energy, and it's cheaper and has no maintenance costs.

Clean Energy Collective is tasked with building, operating and maintaining the solar garden. The Carbondale company has previous experience with community solar projects in the Roaring Fork Valley, and Mashburn said they are also experienced working with electrical cooperatives.

"They really understand our governing structure and what we need to have happen," she said. "That's a big benefit."

Clean Energy Collective is currently working with Montrose County officials to secure required building permits and a location in the Paradox Valley, some 60 miles west of Telluride near the Utah/Colorado border.

"It'll be really interesting once they start breaking ground. I can't imagine what 5,000 solar panels looks like," Mashburn said.

The project is funded by money collected from SMPA's Green Cents and Green Blocks programs. Customers can choose to round up to the next dollar and the small difference goes toward the Green Cents program, which supports renewable energy projects in SMPA's service area. Members can also purchase renewable energy credits to offset their energy consumption, which goes to the Green Blocks fund.

"Only members who are interested in green energy are putting money into this project," Mashburn said.

Clean Energy Collective will also hire local contractors to build the project and maintain it once it is operational.

Solar panels will be available for purchase in the spring once prices and rates are set between SMPA and Clean Energy Collective.

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