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County solar regulations on visual impact moving forward

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The Pitkin County commissioners on Wednesday granted initial approval to new regulations governing the visual impact of home solar panel installations on neighbors.

The commissioners and their planning staff have debated the issue in recent months, showing a rare conflict between the county's pro-new energy stance and their stated goal to preserve the rural country character of the local landscape.

"I think everybody wants to see the use of renewable energy," Commissioner George Newman said. "But it's important that we do take into account how it will affect neighbors."

At least one more public meeting will address the issue this summer, before the commissioners are expected to take a final vote adopting solar rules.

As drafted and discussed Wednesday, the rules would require a public notice and notification to neighbors when larger solar panels are going to be installed.

Drafted rules recommend solar panels of 300 square feet or larger would trigger notification to neighbors, and a public sign — allowing neighbors or concerned residents to protest the installation.

But the commissioners may lower the threshold of size requiring notification.

Commissioner Michael Owsley described a 200-square-foot array as "huge" and said, "If I were a neighbor and that showed up one morning, that would upset me."

The draft also would limit the height of panels on the ground to 12 feet.

Complaints about solar panel plans would go to the county planning and zoning commission.

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