

Aspen, Pitkin County off the mark on off-site solar

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We're scratching our heads at Aspen and Pitkin County officials' reluctance to tweak the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program (REMP) to include off-site solar farms. If the goal of REMP is to speed the upper valley's ongoing switch to clean, renewable energy sources, then downvalley solar farms seem to us a viable, desirable option.

The REMP, a smart and innovative program, was originally devised as a way to offset the environmental impacts of Aspen and Pitkin County's oversized trophy homes, by asking energy-consuming homeowners to either include renewable technologies in their own homes or to contribute money to a fund that supports other renewable projects. In other words, using fees from Aspen property owners with heated driveways and swimming pools, REMP has helped other homeowners erect solar panels or purchase energy-efficient appliances, and has assisted government entities with energy-efficiency upgrades.

Recently, it's been proposed that "off-site mitigation" become an option under REMP. In other words, that Aspen homeowner with the heated driveway would have the option to purchase solar panels at a community solar farm, such as those operated by Clean Energy Collective in El Jebel and Rifle. This step would certainly mark a change in the program – by enabling REMP fees to go directly to a private, for-profit solar outfit – but if the aim is to expand the use of renewables and reduce the community's overall carbon footprint, then perhaps the program should change.

What's the source of the opposition to off-site mitigation? We've heard that it smacks of the upper valley exporting its problems (like unsightly solar panels) downvalley, or using public money to enrich a private enterprise. Maybe officials figure that REMP revenues will drop if homeowners have the off-site option. This may be true, but simply writing a check to the REMP program amounts to a different kind of off-site mitigation anyway.

These concerns seem like small potatoes when set against the overall goal of a sustainable energy future for the valley. And solar farms, like those already established by CEC, are far more efficient and cost-effective than smaller, on-site home installations.

We urge Aspen and Pitkin County officials to ditch their fears, broaden the REMP program and embrace the future of renewable energy – public or private, on-site or off-site. All these options lead the valley in the right direction.

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