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## El Jebel solar farm survives cloudy review

Midvalley board recommends approval of 4,300-panel project after see-saw debate

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EL JEBEL – Cloudy conditions faded away and the sun eventually shined Thursday on a proposal for a five-acre solar farm in El Jebel.

The Roaring Fork Regional Planning and Zoning Commission voted 4-1 to recommend approval for the solar farm proposed by the Clean Energy Collective (CEC). The company wants to install 4,300 solar panels on land it will lease from Ace Lane near his water-ski lake across Highway 82 from the El Jebel City Market. The 2-megawatt solar farm would generate enough power to meet the demands of nearly 200 average-sized homes in the U.S., according to CEC founder and president Paul Spencer.

The discussion among the planning commission roiled along like a runoff-swollen river for 2 1/2 hours, and it looked like the plan was going down to defeat.

Planning commissioner Jay Leavitt was dead-set against the solar farm plan as proposed because of its visual impact.

“It is like five acres of roof panels that have a solid surface of an industrial type,” Leavitt said. “This homogeneous development has an impact and I think it’s wrong.”

Planning commissioner Jacque Whitsitt also opposed the initial proposal. Although no midvalley residents or other concerned citizens showed up to voice opposition at the hearing, Whitsitt said she feared neighbors would throw a “conniption” once the bulldozers roll.

Whitsitt said her concern for that alleged silent majority would dictate her vote. “I’m going to have to, as much as it makes me nauseous, vote no on this,” she said.

On the other end of the five-member board were Steve Chase and Kelly McKenney. Chase spoke passionately about the need for the country to start taking responsibility for its energy needs. “In truth, the world is a shambles,” he said.

The solar farm is a way for the Roaring Fork Valley to offset at least a small portion of its own consumption, according to Chase. “I personally think it’s a responsible thing to do.”

He credited CEC for taking “something that isn’t particularly pretty” and hiding it relatively well. The solar farm is proposed northwest of Lane’s water-ski lake, on a bench above the valley floor that is shielded by cottonwood trees.

As for potential concerns by neighbors, they are much better off than if another strip mall was being developed in the area, Chase said.

McKenney said people in the U.S. need to retrain their brains to look at alternative energy projects as beautiful and green, like an open field, rather than as something “ugly.” She said she supports approving projects that push people toward alternative energy.

“This site seems very reasonable to me,” she said.

Planning commission chairwoman Kim Bock was somewhere in the middle of the two sides in the debate. She initially said she could only support the proposal with a minor alteration on the construction phasing and a major

change on CEC's business model.

CEC is unique because it sells the solar panels and infrastructure of its solar farm to members, as long as they are customers of Holy Cross Energy – a cooperative serving parts of the Roaring Fork Valley, the Eagle Valley and the lower Colorado River Valley. A panel sells for about \$700. Holy Cross buys the power produced by the solar farm and gives customers a credit on their electricity bill for their share of the power produced.

Bock wanted two concessions from CEC on its business model. First, she wanted a cap on the amount of panels that any one member could buy. Her concern, she said, was the owner of a large, consumptive house could hog too much of the farm. She wanted sales limited to the power consumed by an average-sized U.S. household. She also wanted sales to go exclusively to El Jebel area residents.

Spencer didn't object to alterations in construction phasing, but he rejected Bock's business preferences. State law already dictates that any single buyer can only purchase what their house or business consumes, he said. Spencer said he wouldn't agree to tougher restrictions.

As for restricting sales to people in a geographic area, Spencer said it will already be a challenge to sell all memberships in the solar farm. He resisted further limits.

An initial motion by Chase to approve the solar farm failed 2-3, with Leavitt, Bock and Whitsitt opposed. Separate motions by Leavitt and Bock to approve the solar farm with major alterations died for lack of a second.

A second motion to approve the solar farm as proposed with conditions proposed by the Eagle County community development staff was approved 4-1 with only Leavitt opposed. Bock dropped her conditional support and Whitsitt flip-flopped from her initial position.

Whitsitt told Spencer after the meeting that she changed her vote because the neighbors of the solar farm will still have an opportunity to weigh in on the project. The planning commission is just an advisory board. The Eagle County commissioners will review the proposal this summer and make the final decision. No commissioner meeting is scheduled yet.

Whitsitt also said she changed her mind and voted “for the greater good” of alternative energy.

If CEC gets the El Jebel solar farm approved, it will be its third project in the region. It developed a 338-panel solar farm near Blue Lake subdivision. That 77.7-kilowatt system started producing in September.

It is launching a 858-kilowatt solar farm next month at the Garfield County Airport near Rifle. Both arrays are member-owned, with the power purchased by Holy Cross Energy.

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