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## Aspen undecided on off-site community solar mitigation

Council to meet with county on the issue

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ASPEN – After taking in an array of opinions from more than 10 people on the issue of community-based solar power, an Aspen City Council majority on Monday decided it needed more time to make a decision on whether to allow the new form of energy generation into a city program.

Mayor Mick Ireland, Councilman Derek Johnson and interim Councilwoman Ruth Kruger agreed that the city should meet with county officials and also representatives of the board of Community Office for Resource Efficiency (CORE) on the subject of whether power generated by downvalley solar farms should be included as mitigation in the joint Renewable Energy Mitigation Program, or REMP. Councilmen Steve Skadron and Torre wanted to delete “off-site mitigation” – the language that refers to downvalley solar-power sources – from an ordinance that incorporates it into the city’s energy conservation code.

Ireland – despite his vote to continue the discussion – expressed reservations about allowing off-site mitigation into REMP. City staff had recommended that the language in a recently passed ordinance allowing off-site mitigation be deleted because it could adversely affect the successful REMP program.

The mayor said he promised a Pitkin County commissioner that he would wait until a meeting could be held with county officials and the CORE board before deciding whether to keep community-based solar from becoming a REMP mitigation option. But his argument against off-site mitigation centered on his philosophy against giving incentives to a private-sector operation, such as the Clean Energy Collective, a company that has already built two solar farms – one near El Jebel and another in Garfield County – and has plans to build another one.

Ireland also said that allowing off-site mitigation into the program runs counter to the city’s goal of promoting less energy use. With the off-site mitigation option, homeowners who are required to either build solar-based power systems on site to offset excessive energy or make payments to the REMP program would have another avenue for simply writing a check and outsourcing their problem, he said.

“It is about use less, reuse, recycle – not backwards,” Ireland said. “If somebody came in and said, ‘I want to build a heated chocolate fountain in my yard as a tribute to Hunter Thompson, [and] that’s okay because I wrote a big check to somebody’ ... If we live a life of excess and we rationalize it because we sent the problem to Carbondale with some money, then people will rightfully have scorn for us and we will lose an opportunity to educate the rest of the world that the homeowner can do something about this problem on site.”

Skadron argued that allowing off-site mitigation would “tear the heart out of REMP,” which has generated more than \$8 million for energy conservation programs and related expenses since its inception in the late 1990s. The fear that he and other city officials have is that property owners will opt to mitigate by paying the solar-power generators directly instead of contributing to REMP.

Skadron added that there may be a place for community-based solar in the overall scheme of local power generation and city-supported conservation measures, but not in the city-county program at this time.

The debate revolves around the acceptance of community solar power versus continuing full support for REMP, a longtime initiative involving the city of Aspen, Pitkin County and CORE. Supporters of the Clean Energy Collective told council members that the program could be restructured in such a way as to allow off-site mitigation while still bringing revenue into the program.

About two months ago, city staff included language in the ordinance that allowed community-based solar, or “off-site mitigation,” to be included as an option within REMP. Later, following a meeting of officials representing three city departments, that language was deemed detrimental to REMP, much to the displeasure of those involved in or supporting the development of downvalley solar farms.

REMP requires homes of 5,000 square feet or more to offset a portion of their fossil-fuel consumption through on-site renewable energy systems, or pay a fee. It mainly applies to outdoor energy uses, such as swimming pools, snow-melt systems and heated driveways. Initially applied to residential construction, the REMP rules in recent years have changed to include commercial developments that involve outdoor energy uses.

The revenue generated by REMP fees go to other energy conservation efforts, including energy-efficiency projects in public buildings and rebates to citizens who install solar-conservation systems, such as “photovoltaic” – solar panels that convert sunlight into electricity.

City officials say 75 percent of REMP projects in city and county already use on-site mitigation. The other 25 percent make payments that go to REMP, and the uses for that money are determined by CORE.

A CORE official said during Monday's meeting that he supports keeping the program the way it is, without off-site mitigation. However, the organization's board of directors has yet to vote on the matter.

Paul Spencer, president of CEC, said after the meeting that while some of the comments from city officials were discouraging, he still holds hope that a workable solution with city officials can be reached.

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