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Solar collective wants to put panels on county land

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The Carbondale-based Clean Energy Collective may be an innovative way to put more renewable energy into the local grid, but whether it will put big black reflective solar panels on acres of land owned by Pitkin County remains at issue.

The energy company's plan is to build farms of solar panels and sell ownership of them to consumers, giving them credit on their electricity bills for the energy the panels put back into the grid. The company recently broke ground on an array of solar panels in El Jebel. Its model has been hailed as an alternative to the often cost-prohibitive task of placing solar panels on one's home or property. Holy Cross Energy customers can buy into the CEC for \$600 a panel, whereas installing one on private property can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Representatives from the collective met with the Pitkin County commissioners Tuesday and pointed out four county locations where they'd like to place arrays of up to 8,000 solar panels, including an open space area in Emma and county sanitation land near Brush Creek Village.

An 8,000-panel array could power 319 average-sized homes, collective founder Paul Spencer told the commissioners, or 130 homes in Pitkin County. On average, he said, Pitkin's average home uses about 2.5 times as much as the average home elsewhere.

He said about 60 percent of interest in the collective has come from Pitkin County residents.

The commissioners expressed serious doubt about putting acres of solar panels on undeveloped land they've preserved through the county's open space program — or other visible county land.

Commissioner Michael Owsley recommended Spencer meet with the county open space and trails board about their proposal.

"You'll find right away they didn't anticipate open space being used for solar arrays," Owsley warned.

Commissioner Patti Kay-Clapper echoed that sentiment.

"Pitkin County is firmly committed to clean energy. We just don't know if we're committed to it on our open space ... We need to proceed very carefully," she said.

"I love the concept," added Commissioner Jack Hatfield, "but I'm wondering whose backyard this goes in."

In addition to where the panels might go, county officials are researching how the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program (REMP) and the county energy code might be amended to

accommodate the collective solar farms. They asked their building and energy staffers to look at how the REMP might be affected.

Spencer asked that the word “on-site” be deleted from the county energy code on mitigating renewable energy credits.

“Without a full investigation I’m not going to sign off on any of this,” said Hatfield.

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