

Pitkin County mulls collective solar farms

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ASPEN – Affordable land and the building code in Pitkin County may prove a hurdle to the installation of member-owned solar facilities like the one ready to go into operation this week in El Jebel.

The Clean Energy Collective, a Carbondale-based venture that is pursuing plans for collective solar farms at various spots in the Roaring Fork Valley and beyond, would like to expand into Pitkin County.

Paul Spencer of the collective floated several potential sites to county commissioners on Tuesday and pointed out some problems with the building code that could inhibit the success of a member-owned solar installation.

A couple of the largest locales the advocates have identified, one near Snowmass Village and one in Emma, involve open space parcels. Commissioners were not optimistic that they would work, as voter authorization would be required to allow such a use.

“Open space is going to be a challenge,” said Commissioner Jack Hatfield. “We have a few properties that aren't open space, but they're assets.”

One site that could work, roughly 9 to 10 acres owned by the Aspen Consolidated Sanitation District, is across Highway 82 from Brush Creek Road, according to Spencer.

Absent or minimal land costs are key to making the projects work financially, he said, which is why government-owned sites are often identified.

“It really has to be that way to make this work,” he said.

On a broader scale, it would take 90 acres worth of solar panels to offset 10 percent of Pitkin County's electricity use, he said. If the county is firmly committed to renewable energy, it has to commit to accommodating solar installations, Spencer added.

“Pitkin County is firmly committed to renewable energy. We're just not sure we're firmly committed to it on our open space,” said Commissioner Patti Kay-Clapper.

In addition, Spencer asked that the county consider amending its building code, which already encourages renewable energy as mitigation for energy hogs like heated swimming pools and driveways, and establishes a point threshold for efficient buildings that must be met. The code does not, however, currently allow the renewable energy features to be off-site, which is integral to the Clean Energy Collective's approach.

The idea is individuals who can't install a solar project at their home for any of a number of reasons can invest in a member-owned installation that is elsewhere, and receive credit on their energy bills.

The El Jebel solar array involves 340 solar panels and 13 investors who are Holy Cross Energy consumers from around the valley, Spencer said. The collective is breaking ground on an installation at the Garfield County Airport near Rifle that could eventually grow to 4,000 panels. Customers pay \$720 per panel, he said.

Commissioners didn't voice opposition to amending the building code, but indicated they want to study the ramifications first. An on-site installation at a home stays with the residence, Clapper noted, while someone who invests in an off-site system could sell that interest. Then, it's no longer a mitigation connected to the property for which it was purchased.

Spencer said the county's current restrictions on the height of an on-the-ground solar system are also a hurdle. The county is already wrestling with revised regulations to address that issue. Aesthetics and glare are a concern.

"I like the concept, but I wonder whose backyard this goes in," Hatfield said.

It appears, at least, that Pitkin County has an appetite for both electricity and renewable energy, according to Steve Casey, member services and marketing administrator for Holy Cross.

At the end of last year, Holy Cross Energy had about 55,000 meters and 1.2 billion kilowatt hours of energy sales, he said. Pitkin County accounted for 23 percent of the meters, but 28 percent of the kilowatt hour sales.

On the other hand, of the Holy Cross customers who feed energy back into the grid through a renewable energy system – mainly solar – about 42 percent of them are in Pitkin County, he said.

"You've got a group of people who are willing to put renewable energy on their homes," he said.

Spencer believes the Clean Energy Collective's off-site model would prove attractive to other Pitkin County consumers. Some interested investors in the collective's projects in other counties are homeowners in Aspen and Pitkin County, he said.

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