

County rules against off-site solar farms

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Pitkin County is holding its ground on energy conservation policy, and will not allow homeowners with energy-hog features like heated driveways and spas to buy into off-site "community solar" farms to satisfy county energy rules.

The county currently requires new homes that use excessive energy to mitigate their carbon footprint with on-site features like solar panels or other renewable energy sources. Alternately, the county allows new homeowners to pay extra fees for their usage to the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program (REMP).

The county commissioners agreed on Tuesday that they ultimately want homeowners to reduce usage and design greener homes. They were uncomfortable with expanding options for homeowners to pay for irresponsible usage with the purchase of solar panels that are nowhere near their properties.

"We don't want to be just moving impacts downvalley," commission chair Rachel Richards said.

Aspen City Council is currently evaluating the same issue, and is facing some pressure from private solar farm developers to allow homes with excessive energy use to buy panels from the new Carbondale-based Clean Energy Collective to satisfy REMP requirements.

Earlier this month, council members put off making a decision on the policy until they could meet jointly with the county commissioners. The city and county adopted the REMP policy in 2000.

REMP payments are administered for both the city and county by the Community Office for Resource Efficiency (CORE).

"There is an argument that the money goes further when it's filtered through CORE," county energy manager Dylan Hoffman told the commissioners.

CORE director Nathan Ratledge estimated that re-investing REMP money through his office, on average, saves about three times the energy emissions of homeowners doing on-site modifications. That's because CORE staff leverages funds with grants and matching dollars that wouldn't be available to private homeowners.

"We can get more bang for our buck," he said.

Ratledge added that allowing for off-site purchases would encourage an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" mentality for energy use and its impacts.

"The program is really designed to reduce energy consumption," he said.

CORE uses the fees from homeowners to fund energy efficiency upgrades and renewable energy installations in the valley. It does not fund private renewable energy developers, like the Energy Collective.

The Collective's community solar concept has multiple homeowners buy into large solar arrays, which are maintained by professionals for maximum output. No solar business representatives attended the county meeting.

Ratledge also stressed that the REMP program is meant to incentivize homeowners to make energy improvements in their own homes. It essentially penalizes homeowners, through fees, when they do not.

Commissioner Michael Owsley noted that REMP payments are, essentially, the same as buying into off-site solar farms, because they let homeowners pay to keep using excessive energy. He said he hoped there would be a day when local homes are all designed as energy efficient and the REMP program doesn't need to collect fees anymore.

"I'm not comfortable with the program lasting forever," he said.

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