

Pam Boyd pboyd@eaglevalleyenterprise.com

There is an array of tools available for Eagle County residents to employ toward reducing energy use and helping the environment.

The question is, are people using them?

Not to the extent that they could, and that is hurting citizens economically, said Eagle County Environmental Sustainability Coordinator Yuri Kostick.

“Reducing energy use means saving money,” said Kostick.

It also means saving resources and helping the environment but sometimes those issues get bogged down in political or ideological rhetoric. However, Kostick sees the sustainability movement gaining traction, not only locally but nationally and internationally, as the discussion moves from the topic of environmentalism to economics.

But in the weeks and months ahead, look for the county to amp up its economic energy message.

Recently Eagle, Pitkin and Gunnison counties successfully teamed up to win a \$5 million Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant through the U.S. Department of Energy. The grant program is funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) of 2009 and represents a presidential priority to deploy cheap, clean, and reliable energy technologies across the country

According to Kostick, the money will be shared by the three counties over the next three years to educate and promote energy efficiency programs. The counties are currently writing the plan for how they will sell energy reduction efforts and how they will measure efficiency targets.

Kostick noted there is a lot of education to be done to let people know what's available to them. Additionally, there is a whole toolbox of items for homeowners to consider.

A virtual department

Eagle County itself doesn't have a specific department dedicated solely to the environmental issues. What it does have is an Environmental Health department dedicated to issues including water and air quality, a focus on the environmentally friendly Eco-Build guidelines in the Community Development department, a focus on recycling and other measures in its landfill operations and an organization-wide awareness of environmental efforts.

Noting that various employees and offices have a stake in the overall sustainability effort, Kostick said the county has a virtual department — a location on the county website where people can go to learn about programs and issues. That differs from some of the county's neighbors, including Pitkin County where there is a stand-alone Energy Management Department.

As an organization, Kostick said the county is dedicated to improving energy awareness in the areas. “We have 500 employees. We have to think we can get some good idea from that,” he said.

In particular, the county is looking at improving its own building efficiencies. That means taking a more critical look at routine maintenance, for example.

“It doesn't make sense environmentally or economically to switch out something that works,” said Kostick. However, when a boiler goes down or a lighting fixture needs to be replaced, the county is now looking more critically at its options.

“If our buildings run efficiently, it means we are saving money. So you don't put in an 88 percent efficient boiler, you put in a 95 percent efficient boiler,” said Kostick.

Bright idea helps turn on the lights

Solar energy now accessible to Holy Cross customers

Derek Franz

df Franz@eaglevalleyenterprise.com

The problem with solar power isn't its carbon footprint — it's the fact that solar panels are expensive and require a lot of space. Not just anyone can have solar energy.

A company in Carbondale is changing that, however.

“Solar has been isolated in its success because it's been inaccessible,” said Paul Spencer, the owner of Clean Energy Collective. “Now, for the first time, anyone can own solar and solar is a very sound investment.”

Spencer said one of the major road blocks to making solar energy economical is the up-front cost. Installation is expensive.

“By the time the system pays for itself it's time to replace it,” he said.

CEC cuts the price of owning solar in half by using the business principal of buying in bulk.

“Everybody seems to think we might be on to something,” Spencer said. “We have interest from Florida, Virginia ...” he listed too many places to keep up with.

Spencer said he's aware of solar-panel leasing programs but not an ownership program like CEC's.

“This seems to be the first of it's kind,” he said. “Definitely, my over-arching goal was to create a vehicle to make solar power wide spread, something that more people besides the environmentalists would be attracted to.”

How it works

The “mid-valley array,” which is in Carbondale, is a solar array owned by investors from Aspen to Vail. Holy Cross Energy customers can buy a 230-watt solar panel in such an array (the current one is sold out) for about \$725, or a watt for \$3.15.

“That's approximately half of the real cost for the panel,” Spencer said. “It is a one-time cost and built into that price is a 50-year warranty and maintenance cost.”

Anyone with an electric bill is eligible to purchase those solar panels. That's where Holy Cross Energy comes in — the company credits customers who have solar investments. A customer's credit is calculated as a percentage based on the solar array's total production and the percentage of the array owned by the customer. For an easy-math example, if an array produces 100 units and the customer owns 10 percent of the array, the customer is credited 10 units. (In the energy business, a “unit” is called a kilowatt-hour.)

To make solar even more appealing to customers, CEC has worked it so that solar investments can be transferred, resold or even donated. A customer doesn't need to apply for rebates or tax credits, either — CEC takes care of all that.

“It could be as little as a 10-minute conversation and you own solar,” Spencer said.

Future plans

The mid-valley array was sold out in mid-June before it was operational in mid-August, Spencer said.

Recently, construction of another array started at the Garfield County Airport and there are plans for more. Under consideration is an eight-acre site at the Eagle County Landfill.

“There are definitely other projects we're looking at,” Spencer said.

Spencer is an electrical engineer and a business man to boot.

“I've been building companies for 20 years,” he said. “I built my first company as a sophomore in college and my second by the time I graduated.”

In 2004, Spencer built his home in the Roaring Fork Valley completely off the grid. Not long after that, he got involved with plans for an 89-home development centered around a solar array.

“I had to work extensively with the energy company — Holy Cross — to make it work,”

he said. “Ninety-nine out of 100 energy companies would've said, ‘Absolutely not.’ There were a lot of things to figure out. Then I thought, if you can do it for a house and even a neighborhood, why not a whole community?”

CEC took off from there, after a lot of “frustration and hard work.” Besides himself, Spencer now has three employees to keep the business flying in addition to work that is outsourced.

“It's been really fun because it's something I'm passionate about,” he said.

Related news

Holy Cross is currently accepting five-year plans to reduce electric energy consumption.

Companies are submitting proposals by Friday, Oct. 8, for five-year plans that include public education campaigns and incentives for energy consumers to become more efficient, such as upgrading old refrigerators.

“Education is important,” said Steve Casey with Holy Cross. “I think there's a disconnect between what energy requires and what a consumer perceives a device uses.”

Casey used the example of a space heater being used in a room for a couple hours a day instead of raising the temperature of the entire home for that period.

“If you could educate these people there could be huge energy savings,” he said. “Education is key.”

Casey expects three or four companies “with a Colorado presence” will submit proposals.