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Glenwood council hears community solar pitch

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HEATHER MCGREGOR
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GLENWOOD SPRINGS — The owner of an El Jebel firm that develops community solar arrays is recommending that Glenwood Springs Electric start with a one acre pilot project.

An array of that size could supply clean electricity to about 50 to 100 customers of the city-owned utility, said Paul Spencer, president of the Clean Energy Collective.

Spencer made a pitch for the community solar concept to the Glenwood Springs City Council in a work session on Thursday. Council members and residents asked questions, but no action was taken.

Holy Cross Energy has been working with Spencer for more than a year to develop community solar arrays in its service territory, which surrounds Glenwood Springs and extends into Pitkin and Eagle counties.

The collective built a 338-panel array in 2010 near Blue Lake in El Jebel on 1/3 of an acre that immediately sold out to 19 Holy Cross customers. It built an array this year of 3,575 panels on five acres at the west end of the runway at the Garfield County Airport near Rifle. Spencer expects to eventually sell all the panels to 250 to 350 customers of the rural electric co-op.

Holy Cross customers, residential and commercial, owners and renters, can buy one or more solar panels for about \$500 each, and the electricity the panels actually produce, worth about \$45 to \$50 a year, is credited on their monthly electric bills, he said.

Glenwood Springs Electric customers and some members of City Council have expressed interest in the same arrangement. Spencer said the collective hosted a booth at Strawberry Days and collected eight pages of signatures from people who would be interested.

Spencer noted that because so many properties are shaded by trees and steep hillsides, or have unfavorable roof alignments, only about 10 percent of Glenwood Springs Electric customers could install a solar energy system on their property that would reach full productivity.

A community solar site, however, would be located in an area with maximum solar access somewhere within the Glenwood Electric service area.

Possible sites could be the rooftops of large commercial buildings, the back side of Iron Mountain on the Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park property, or the steep slope behind Valley View Hospital.

Spencer said the collective handles the permitting and construction of the array, the marketing and sales of panels to customers, changes to the utility's billing system and the long-term maintenance of the array. The cost to the city electric utility, he said, would be zero.

"I'd love to sit down with you and see how to make this a reality for your residents," he said.

hmcgregor@postindependent.com

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