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Pitkin County cool to off-site solar option

Energy program sticks with fee or on-site mitigation

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JANET URQUHART

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ASPEN — Pitkin County doesn't currently allow a homeowner to invest in a community solar farm when they must offset energy use on their property, and county commissioners agreed Tuesday to keep it that way.

The issue has become a matter of debate in the city of Aspen, which, like the county, requires the owners of homes of more than a certain size, and homes that have outdoor energy uses like heated pools and driveways, to either offset a certain amount of energy use on site or pay a fee. Both jurisdictions participate in the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program, or REMP, which establishes the energy-mitigation requirements.

The City Council has yet to decide whether an Aspen homeowner could mitigate for a heated driveway by, for example, investing in a solar installation in El Jebel. A homeowner in unincorporated Pitkin County does not have that option.

The homeowner could put a solar or geothermal project, for example, on their own property to meet REMP requirements, or pay a fee instead. The fee revenues are invested in energy-efficiency projects in public buildings elsewhere in the upper Roaring Fork Valley and used to provide rebates to residents of the valley who install renewable energy projects or invest in energy-efficient appliances.

The investment of REMP revenues, overseen by the Aspen-based Community Office for Resource Efficiency with approval by the city and county, is leveraged to more than offset the energy uses that generate the fees in the first place, according to Nathan Ratledge, CORE director.

In a sense, the spending of the fees constitutes off-site mitigation, noted commissioners Michael Owsley and Rob Ittner, but commissioners agreed homeowners shouldn't be able to buy directly into a community-based solar farm instead of putting the solar panels on their own property or paying the REMP fees.

Carbondale-based Clean Energy Collective, a private-sector operation, has built a community solar farm in El Jebel, is working on one in the Rifle area and is looking at sites for other installations. The company has urged the city to allow homeowners to buy into its projects rather than install their own solar projects to meet REMP requirements.

Commissioner Rachel Richards took issue with exporting the impact of REMP to large, visible solar farms elsewhere.

"It has a little bit of a nuance to me of moving your impacts downvalley," she said.

"There's a strong cultural message being sent by requiring people to deal with it in their homes or on their property," Ratledge added.

Clean Energy Collective last year approached county commissioners about locating a solar farm within Pitkin County, and about allowing off-site investment in solar farms through the REMP program, but made little headway. At that time, commissioners weren't keen on solar farms on county open space and made no decision about letting REMP participants invest in off-site solar installations. On Tuesday, they rejected the latter idea.

janet@aspentimes.com

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