

Garfield County commissioners OK solar farm plan at county airport

Fairgrounds project on hold

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colorado – County commissioners on Monday gave tentative approval to a plan to install a large solar farm at the Garfield County Regional Airport outside Rifle.

The Clean Energy Collective (CEC), a Carbondale-area renewable energy cooperative, is working in partnership with Holy Cross Energy to build the pilot project.

They've identified a site at the southeast corner of the airport that can support an 890-kilowatt solar electric generating station, the CEC's Paul Spencer said at Monday's county commissioners meeting.

It would be the second large solar farm in the Rifle area, following completion in early 2009 of a 2.3-megawatt (2,300 kilowatt) system at the city of Rifle's Energy Innovation Center site on the north side of Interstate 70.

The airport site would be fully owned by Holy Cross customers who choose to opt-in and purchase clean energy in the new community array, Spencer explained. Holy Cross plans to offer customers the same benefits to buy into the system as it would for individual roof-mount systems, including power credits and rebates.

"The CEC will serve as a project facilitator to develop, manage and maintain the project on behalf of Holy Cross and its customers," Spencer wrote in a project description presented to county commissioners.

"This model will expand the market for clean energy by opening up ownership options to renters, to customers with limited solar access on existing properties, or to people who would like to purchase small fractions of clean energy solutions."

Airport Director Brian Condie said the site proposed for the solar farm is not likely to be used for aviation purposes for at least 20 years.

Commissioners voted 3-0 to prepare a 20-year lease for the site, with the possibility for two 10-year extensions. If an aviation-related user were to come along in the meantime, the user would have to pay for the relocation of the solar panels.

"This is a good way for Garfield County residents to move toward a clean energy economy, and is more of a free market solution that can be sustainable in the long run," commented former Glenwood Springs city councilman Dan Richardson, who now works on renewable energy issues for Gov. Bill Ritter's office.

In a related item before the commissioners on Monday, the board decided to wait before it issues a request for proposals to install solar panels on the roof of the riding arena at the fairgrounds in Rifle.

The fairgrounds site was selected as one of the Garfield New Energy Communities Initiative projects for a \$475,000 solar array that could save the county more than \$100,000 in electricity charges over the 20-year life of the project.

The installer who wins the contract would be eligible to use an \$87,500 grant from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to defray the costs of the installation. However, concerns about how that should be reflected in the contract language prompted commissioners to ask for further revisions before sending the request out.

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