



- Paul Spencer/ Clean Energy Collective

## Community input sought on solar farm

BY [MADELEINE OSBERGER](#),

Should Snowmass Village play host to the country's first community-owned solar farm? Elected officials want local input on the proposed project, which was introduced this week by Paul Spencer of the Clean Energy Collective in Carbondale.

The solar array, which could include up to 1,600 panels on a 1.45-acre site, would be located on a steep slope uphill from Mountain View employee housing. Currently zoned multi-family, the land parcel is considered by and large unbuildable due to the soils and grade of the property, Housing Manager Joe Coffey told the Town Council this week.

While concealed from its immediate neighbors, the solar panels would be visible from a portion of the Snowmass Mall, the numbered lots and much of the ski area.

Last year, Town Council approved the Town's Environmental Sustainability Plan. The plan's first goal, as noted by Town Manager Russ Forrest, is "energy conservation and climate protection." Significantly reducing consumption of non-renewable energy and fuels, increasing use of non-polluting renewable energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions are part and parcel of that primary goal.

### Public and private partners

Some individuals who are interested in solar power have found adding it to their homes can be cost-prohibitive. Others may live on a property that really isn't suitable for solar panels.

Enter the cooperative idea, which brings together public and private partners. In this version, Holy Cross Energy customers who choose to buy into the array and the Clean Energy Collective would come together to develop the 750 kilowatt electric system. A customer could invest in as little as one panel, which could run an estimated \$500, said Spencer, a 35-year resident of Basalt. Development of the solar farm would be phased, depending on investment dollars.

Energy that is created through the solar farm is returned to the "grid," which benefits Town-owned buildings and residents, according to a staff memo. As proposed, the cooperative could generate enough energy for 73 average homes, though Spencer noted that many Snowmass residences couldn't be classified as "average."

Spencer went on to add that Holy Cross is "a full partner in the project and plans to offer customers in the community-array equivalent benefits to what it delivers for roof-mount solar projects (including power credits and rebates)."

Is it possible the energy could be shipped off to the East Coast, one councilman asked. Spencer said no, Snowmass-produced energy would remain in the local inventory, adding that by the time it got to New York, the power would dissolve anyway.

### Site specifics (subhead)

A "power equipment box," which as described sounds like a small building, would be hidden behind the 10.5 to 11-foot high solar panels. A transformer would be placed on site that would be "directly connected to the existing 3 Phase power line in coordination with Holy Cross Electric," according to Spencer's memo to the Town.

"I'm supportive of your concept...but other aspects must be considered," Town Councilman John Wilkinson said.

Long-time local resident and Realtor George Huggins said he first became interested in the concept last year when he spied solar panels on the Rodeo Place home. Participation in the ARE-Day conference in Aspen further “enlightened” Huggins to the clean energy idea.

Whereas some elected officials have lamented about the visual impacts of the solar farm, Huggins said he believes otherwise. “Isn’t it fantastic everyone can see it in West Village? (Guests) will go home and say, ‘what’s the deal?’”

Would this be a sound financial investment? The owners of single-family homes equipped with solar panels find that it takes more than a generation to see a return on their investment. Spencer said with an array, the investment could be returned in 13-15 years. Moreover, he said, when rebates and tax credits are figured into the mix, the actual cost per watt of energy is about 57 percent less than traditional pricing.

While no one in the room disputed the value of clean energy, property value remains a key issue.

“If you consider approval, you are locking up a piece of land for a significant amount of time,” said Town Manager Russ Forrest.

With regard to the proposed land lease, Councilman Arnie Mordkin raised this issue: “Does the community want to give away for 40 years, with no remuneration, a piece of its land?” Town Attorney John Dresser said that actually what the Clean Energy Collective is seeking is 30 years, with a 20-year extension.

A timetable offered up by Spencer, that called for installation this year, was deemed unrealistic given the approvals and feedback that would be critical to this project. Councilmembers would also like to bring members of the Financial Advisory Board into the process to determine the worth of the 1.45-acre town-owned site.

While there is a 700-piece solar array in the valley, located on CRMS property in Carbondale, Spencer emphasized that “we’re the only game in the country” offering a cooperative.

For Mayor Bill Boineau, citizen buy-in is key. He stressed that “We have to get this out to the community” before any decision can be rendered.

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