

Solar garden to give new life to old landfill

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An old landfill is more of a liability than an asset: A big, flat open space that you can't build on, that belches methane and that threatens groundwater if it's not maintained.

That's the situation [Colorado Brownfields Foundation](#), a nonprofit that works to remove environmental obstacles to community development, struggled with at the former Templeton Gap Landfill near Woodmen Road and Powers Boulevard, just south of St. Francis Medical Center. The 40-acre landfill opened in the 1970s, shut down in the late 1980s and has sat there ever since — a privately owned mesa of dirt and grass with a great view of Pikes Peak and little to no economic value.

The city of Colorado Springs has gradually encircled the site, but never annexed the landfill, since there was no reason to. It remains owned by a group of private partners from its days as an operating business, although it's managed by Colorado Brownfields.

"The reason why they can't get rid of it is, who would want it?" Jesse Silverstein, executive director of Colorado Brownfields said of the site's owners. "If you own the site, you're responsible for any pollution that might come off of it. The only thing anyone is buying there is the potential liability. That's kind of the stickler — that's what makes a brownfield a brownfield."

Then, in September, the City Council approved a community solar gardens program designed to allow residents to buy or lease solar panels in a central installation instead of putting them on their own roofs, but still receive credit for the energy produced on their utility bills. Several companies quickly entered the field and, all of the sudden, a big, flat open space that belches methane wasn't completely useless.

After approval by the El Paso County planning commission last week, [Clean Energy Collective](#), a Carbondale-based solar garden company, plans to begin installing 500 kilowatts of solar panels on 3½ acres of the former landfill as soon as next week.

Placing solar panels on a landfill carries a lot of headaches and added costs, said Paul Spencer, president of Clean Energy Collective, but reusing the land for renewable energy made too much environmental sense not to go ahead.

"I can tell you, it would have been far easier for us to just go find a different piece of property. It's a major headache," Spencer said. "We do see this from a vision perspective — that this would be a great use for these types of properties in the future."

Although landfills have hosted solar panels elsewhere in the country, the Templeton Gap project will be the first time a project has been done on a privately owned property, and working out the legal tangles involved with liability and environmental stewardship make it a model for future projects all over the country, Silverstein said. Both the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory have taken in interest in the project and provided support, he said.

"Given the challenges of potential environmental issues, we saw this as a really good research opportunity

for us,” Silverstein said.

Colorado Brownfields has been working on finding a use for the Templeton Gap site for about five years, Silverstein said, and explored putting recreation fields atop the land or capturing the methane generated by the decaying garbage for use in heating or generating electricity.

Solar panels are a great fit, he said, and Clean Energy Collective’s project is designed to allow a methane-collection project to be put in place around the panels in the future, if Colorado Brownfields can find funding for that project.

Clean Energy Collective is leasing the land for 50 years, and those lease payments will, in turn, be used to update some of the environmental mitigation work on the landfill.

“You have these landfills, the worst thing that can happen to them is they sit there and they erode over time,” Spencer said. “The best thing that can happen to them is to have some sort of operational facility on them to keep them up to date. It’s using compromised land for something that’s well suited for that.”

Dave Rose, spokesman for El Paso County, said it’s a win for everyone.

“It’s exciting to see something that is compatible and can work on that property,” Rose said. “It’s positive to have something going on out there that will be productive.”

Although the solar panels will occupy only a small portion of the site, Spencer hopes that the project could grow in the future. And, if not, Silverstein said there are about 200 other closed landfills across the state just sitting there.

“These old landfills, because of the geotechnical issues, may be difficult to develop,” Silverstein said. “We think they’re in really good locations and we think they’re a good size and scale for renewable energy.”

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Community solar gardens

Clean Energy Collective is building a community solar garden on the former Templeton Gap Landfill site, near Woodmen Road and Powers Boulevard.

In a community solar garden, customers buy or lease solar panels in a central installation, but receive credit from Colorado Springs Utilities just as if the panels were on their own roof. Clean Energy Collective panels cost \$535 each and there is a two-panel minimum.

For more information on the Templeton Gap solar garden project, go to springscleanenergy.com, or call 1-800-646-0323.