

Solar power competition heats up in Springs

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It may be November, but solar power is heating up in the Springs.

This week, a second community solar garden company, [Clean Energy Collective](#), was approved by Colorado Springs Utilities and plans to break ground on a 500-kilowatt solar installation by the end of the year. A solar garden allows people to buy or lease panels in a large solar farm rather than putting them on their own roof, but still earn credit on their utility bills for the power produced.

While new to Colorado Springs, Clean Energy Collective built Colorado's first solar garden two years ago in El Jebel outside of Carbondale and has since opened a much larger array near Rifle. Founder and president Paul Spencer said the company is developing about 33 megawatts of solar gardens around the country.

"We're very excited to be considered as one of the solutions locally and to have customers there in Colorado Springs," Spencer said.

Another company, [SunShare](#), began leasing solar panels in September, when the City Council approved the solar garden program, and is building a 500-kilowatt solar installation at Venetucci Farm. School District 11's board approved plans to pursue its own solar garden at a meeting Wednesday.

The biggest difference between SunShare and Clean Energy Collective's plans, Spencer said, is that his company sells customers the panels in the solar garden, while SunShare offers a 20-year lease.

"The long term benefit is you actually own an asset that you can sell at any time and that asset is going to be producing power for 40-50 years," Spencer said.

SunShare's founder, David Amster-Olszewski, said that federal tax law makes leasing panels in a solar garden much simpler than selling them, because selling requires a two-step process that adds uncertainty to the process. Selling is more complicated than leasing, Spencer said, but his company has a track record of making it work.

Clean Energy Collective is finalizing a lease for its solar site, Spencer said, and plans to have it installed and operating by the end of January. The company is taking deposits of \$100 per panel; panels cost \$530 and there is a two-panel minimum. The price includes an escrow fund to cover maintenance at the solar farm.

Spencer acknowledged that SunShare may have already attracted many of the early adopters in the Springs, but said that Colorado Springs Utilities' territory is large enough to support both projects.

Utilities approved 2 megawatts of solar farms in the program, each a maximum of 500 kilowatts and with no company operating more than two. SunShare has already applied for a second garden, so, with Clean Energy Collective and District 11, the program is likely full now.