



- Special to the Daily

Carbondale solar company tries to revolutionize industry

The Clean Energy Collective allows homeowners to buy into solar energy for as little as \$750

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EAGLE COUNTY, Colorado – What could be the next big idea in solar energy started with two fairly simple ideas: not everybody's roof is solar-panel friendly, and bigger really is better sometimes.

On the Web

www.easycleanenergy.com

The Carbondale-based Clean Energy Collective has an ambitious business plan – get investors to buy pieces of bigger solar energy facilities, which will allow them to get clean energy credits from Holy Cross Energy. Instead of writing a five-figure check for a rooftop system that generates electricity, Clean Energy Collective customers can tap into at least some alternative energy for as little as \$725.

That relatively small check racks up relatively small monthly, and even yearly savings. But over the 50-year life of the solar facility, that \$725 check will eventually produce more than \$7,000 in energy credits, according to company estimates. The company also handles all the tax paperwork, and, more important, all the maintenance and upkeep.

According to company development director Lauren Martindale, founder Paul Spencer's original idea of using a larger solar panel “farm” was originally meant for a subdivision planned in the Roaring Fork Valley, in order to make the homes there essentially self-sufficient in electricity use – meaning the solar cells would produce at least as much power as the 90 homes used.

That subdivision hasn't broken ground yet, victim of the slumping national economy, but the idea of providing solar power to many homes from one source has started to take off.

From a garden to a farm

The company broke ground this year on a relatively small, 89 kilowatt, solar facility in El Jebel, and is marketing the solar energy credits to potential buyers.

Next is a plan for an 880 kilowatt array at the Garfield County airport, and a little farther down the line is a proposal for an even larger, two megawatt array on about seven acres at the Eagle County Landfill. The power from that system would be enough to light about 400 homes, or to handle the electricity needs of the new materials recycling equipment at the landfill.

Those systems will be built as the Clean Energy Collective gets more people to participate.

“The fundamental business concept makes sense – 100 rooftop systems cost more than one centrally-located system,” Eagle County Planner Adam Palmer said.

And, Martindale said, thanks to the wholehearted involvement of Holy Cross Energy, people are able to get better rates for their alternative-energy investment than someone with a rooftop system. That's especially true for commercial customers, she said.

Holy Cross also allows anyone in its service area to buy into the Clean Energy Collective's systems.

In the spirit of getting people more involved in the electricity they use, the Clean Energy Collective lets customers check their solar panels' production in real time either on-line or through their iPhones – which is a lot easier than getting out the ladder, climbing on the roof and cleaning the panels on the roof.

One patch in the quilt

While Spencer and his fellow investors believe they've found a way to make solar energy easier to create, Eagle Valley Alliance for Sustainability Executive Director Matt Scherr thinks the idea is just one part of what will be a more complex and diverse way to create energy in this country.

"This needs to get big, but not too big," Scherr said. "It's the same with rooftop solar or geothermal."

While Scherr said the Clean Energy Collective's overall plan is intriguing, he's most interested in the idea that people will invest in the company to get a return.

"The bigger deal is really about finance," Scherr said. "These are money solutions to energy issues, and it's going to be interesting to see how people respond."

And the for-profit element of the company hasn't escaped notice.

While the Eagle County Commissioners were generally receptive to the idea of a large solar-energy facility at the landfill, they did ask questions about whether they could do a bargain-rate lease on property to a for-profit company. Questions have also come from Aspen City Council members.

And, Martindale said, the company and its business plan have run into several speed bumps since starting out, including the federal Securities Exchange Commission and the Colorado Public Utilities Commission.

But that isn't stopping the company from considering more and bigger ideas.

"Next year we'll serve Xcel customers," Martindale said. "We're looking for franchise opportunities, and we hope to expand to other forms of alternative energy down the road.

"We want to make it easier and cheaper for people to participate," she added. "There are a lot of things that hold people back."

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