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## **Pitkin County Says No to Community Solar Initiative**

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**To (slightly) paraphrase the literary great, Charles Dickens ... *April has been the best of times. It's been the the worst of times ...* for Paul Spencer's Clean Energy Collective (CEC).**

By David A. Hill, Executive Editor

### **Sunny in Rifle**

Earlier this month the Carbondale-based community solar startup broke ground on its newest project on the Western Slope, the Garfield County Solar Array, a 1.4 MW system sited on 6.5 acres of the Garfield County Regional Airport in Rifle. When completed, it will be the state's largest private solar array.

For the array's first phase, the otherwise unusable south-facing hillside site will be used to house more than 3,575 solar panels, or 858 kW of capacity, producing over 1,500 MWh (1.5 GWh) of clean, renewable energy each year. The facility is expected to begin producing power by mid-May, and will serve as many as 350 CEC members.

The PV development is a win-win for the local utility, according to Holy Cross Energy.

"Given the success of the CEC's first site, the magnitude of the Garfield County Array will bring greater awareness and tangibility to the model, and be a great benefit to us," says Steve Casey of Holy Cross Energy, which provides power to most Roaring Fork and Vail Valley consumers. The utility is the leader among Colorado's 22 electric distribution cooperatives in terms of installed capacity for renewable energy generation.

### **Pitkin Shutdown**

The excitement from the groundbreaking ceremony in Rifle was tempered yesterday when Pitkin County Commissioners agreed to continue its arcane policy of not allowing a homeowner to invest in a community solar farm when they must offset energy use on their property.

In other parts of the state, community solar gardens are gathering political and public support. Not so here — at least on the political side of the equation.

During the last year, Clean Energy Collective has been courting county commissioners about locating a solar farm within Pitkin County, as well as allowing off-site investment in solar developments through the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program, but hasn't gained any traction. Last year, Commissioners indicated they weren't keen on solar farms on county open space and made no decision about letting REMP participants invest in off-site solar installations. Both Pitkin County and the City of Aspen hold jurisdiction in REMP, which establishes energy mitigation requirements for funding.

### **Aspen To Follow?**

Aspen City Council has yet to decide whether an Aspen homeowner could mitigate for energy-consuming systems by investing in a CEC community solar development down valley.

Right now, however, it doesn't look good.

During a presentation by Spencer and CEC supporters before the Town Council earlier this month, Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland (surprise — up for re-election again this year!) and other council members expressed concern that CEC could upset the financial balance of the town's REMP involvement. Some members also wondered about sending mitigation responsibilities of energy hog homes to a solar farm down valley ... where a well-heeled homeowner could simply write a check to take care of the issue.

A couple points: Aspen city officials could have addressed energy consumption issues with mega-sized homes long ago; but for years the unofficial town policy was to agree with nearly everything developers and their clients desired — including those mega-sized multimillion dollar structures that were built with every conceivable convenience items like heated driveways, massive swimming pools and redundant kitchen appliances, to name a few. For the most part, no restrictions applied. But, after all, the taxes and fees generated by the construction of said homes fed the Aspen City government beast, so why not let bygones be bygones?

Now that saving energy is fashionable among the elected, they're pushing for on-site mitigation. We're skeptical of how motivated the mostly part-time residents of the energy hog dwellings will be — enough to erect rooftop solar panels, geothermal heating systems or small wind resources? Doubtful, as they just don't care enough about the issue. But, yes, they could write a check for a share of a PV system output off-site — a scenario that seems strangely disagreeable to some town officials' utopian view of how energy savings should be instituted.

Mayor Ireland has been heard to proclaim on more than one occasion something to the effect that .... 'we need to reduce our energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions at the local level.' Apparently, buying into a solar array down valley isn't *local enough*, even though it would, indeed, cut into GHG emission levels.

The thing is, Clean Energy Collective is a lot more local than both local utilities. Roughly 30% of City of Aspen Electric's power comes from Nebraska wind farms, yes Council members, NEBRASKA! Another chunk comes from Rudi (about as close as El Jebel). The vast majority of Holy Cross' supply comes from other areas of the western slope (out of their network).

### **Remp**

The REMP issue could probably be worked out if Clean Energy Collective were allowed to join the party.

The program has raised about \$10M in fees and the staff represents that only 1 in 4 projects pay the fee, the remaining projects mitigate with one of the onsite solutions. That means there is another, say, \$20M in mitigation solutions onsite (slightly cheaper than the fees), for \$30M total. So, to the tune of roughly \$30M of additional spending, project owners have decided not to reduce their use, but to mitigate through REMP. If the program was a great deterrent, these numbers would be meniscal.

In other words, REMP has been unsuccessful in deterring energy use. Of course, \$10M of worth of the failures went into their coffers, so who's complaining ... If they want to prevent snowmelt, don't allow it (period).

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