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Rifle Gets Charged About Solar Garden

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Sun-splashed skies and a strong breeze greeted a sizable and enthusiastic crowd yesterday in Rifle for the dedication of the new community-owned solar garden on the edge of the Garfield County Airport.

By David A. Hill, Executive Editor

Those in attendance heard from executives of Clean Energy Collective (CEC) and Holy Cross Energy about the 858 kW array that sits on an otherwise unusable five acre hillside site, as well as Rifle Mayor, Keith Lambert, and former Governor Bill Ritter.

The occasion marked CEC's largest community-owned PV project yet — and the largest of its kind nationally — in what some would describe as an unlikely locale. Rifle has been known for years as a hub of the natural gas industry on the West Slope.

But an aggressive approach to developing a diversified energy platform by Garfield County commissioners and Mayor Lambert (pictured below), coupled with funding mechanisms put in place by the Ritter Administration, have made it a "model city in Colorado and nationally for how to integrate clean energy resources with traditional extraction."



[1]

Other notables in attendance included Del Worley, CEO of Holy Cross Energy; Neal Lurie, Director of the Colorado Solar Energy Industries Association; Greg Russi, Chair of the Garfield New Energy Communities Initiative; and Karen Lowe - Senior Vice-President of Commercial Banking for JP Morgan Chase, the lending organization that provided funding for the project.

The former Governor and other speakers lauded the leadership of CEC under its President, Paul Spencer, and Holy Cross Energy for their pioneering efforts toward developing solar gardens in the area, in which local citizens can buy into and reduce their electricity bills. Holy Cross Energy is a not-for-profit, member-owned electric cooperative utility providing electricity, energy products and services to more than 55,000 consumers in the Western Colorado Counties of Eagle, Pitkin, Garfield, Mesa and Gunnison.



[2]

The utility was the first to embrace CEC's concept of a community-owned solar collective, and today is a leader among Colorado's 22 electric distribution cooperatives in terms of installed capacity for renewable energy generation.

"Our ability to move to a clean energy economy in Colorado is a product of the public's will and the political will that the people of the state have to really try and find clean energy solutions," Ritter said.



[3]

"Clean Energy Collective has it right. This is a way for people to be able to have affordable power and to be able to participate and feel good about how they're generating their energy,"

The new array's 3,575-panels will produce more than 1,500 MWh (1.5 GWh) of clean, renewable energy each year, serving as many as 350 CEC members. A current customer of CEC spoke for a few minutes about the "no hassle" relationship and how easy it is to buy into the solar garden concept, in his case, the El Jebel array in the Roaring Fork Valley which CEC launched more than a year ago.

Ritter urged Holy Cross to continue finding ways to produce energy through renewable resources.

"Today's ceremony proved a milestone in showing that the community-owned, utility-scale model works. "We are leveraging scalability to the benefit of each individual panel owner and our structure allows members to receive all of the rebates and tax incentives of home-sited systems", explains Spencer. "You don't even need a roof to adopt clean energy today, and the paybacks are higher than ever – both for the environment and financially" Spencer added.

Residents of Aspen, which is also served by Holy Cross Energy, can only hope their town officials eventually see the light when it comes to community solar developments.

So far, CEC's Spencer has been unable to convince town council and Mayor Mick Ireland, despite the obvious advantages for homeowners. Consider that only about 15 percent of all

structures are ideally suited for harnessing the power of the sun, and in a town like Aspen, with plenty of large trees and shaded hillsides, that figure is most certainly less.

You would think the now-proven concept of citizens buying into a community solar garden — with a savings on electricity bills and CO2 mitigation — would be a no-brainer. But politicians, even in a supposedly “enlightened” place like Aspen, protect their turf and are only progressive when it fits their agenda.

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