Pitkin County board approves solar farm

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Community members listen to a presentation about a project application for a solar farm during the Pitkin County Commissioners meeting in Aspen on Wednesday, November 13, 2019.
Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times

Pitkin County commissioners Wednesday unanimously approved construction of a controversial, 35-acre solar farm between Aspen and Woody Creek.

“If we don’t turn around climate change soon … millions of plants and animals will go extinct on Earth,” Commissioner Steve Child said. “If we lose snow and skiing, it’s game over for this valley at that point as far as I can see.”

Commissioner Patti Clapper choked up as she spoke of her children and grandchildren before the board voted.

“I’ve been listening to the concerns of the community and I take that to heart,” she said. “But I have to look at the bigger picture and Pitkin County’s next generation.”

Bryan Hannegan, president and CEO of Holy Cross Energy and one of the partners in the solar farm project, praised the county board’s decision afterward

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said. “This community is very interested in climate action. We look forward to making it happen.”

Wednesday’s approval came after about six hours, when commissioners heard about the solar farm from community development staff, members of the applicant team and members of the public. The application was previously approved by both staff planners and the Pitkin County Planning and Zoning Commission, which voted 4-1 to recommend it after two lengthy, well-attended meetings in July and August.

Opposition to the 18,000-panel project, which will be located between McLain Flats Road and the Roaring Fork River, came from residents of Woody Creek, the W/J Ranch housing development and Brush Creek Village, who mainly objected to the solar panels' visual impacts. Valley residents who wanted clean energy supported the project, frequently with dire warnings about the coming effects of climate change.

In the end, the unanimous vote reflected commissioners' frequently voiced commitment to curbing greenhouse gases and taking action against climate change.

The board declared a climate emergency last month at the prompting of local students, is in the process of revamping building codes with an eye toward greener construction countywide, and adopted a Climate Action Plan in 2012 that guides many of the board's decisions and actions. In addition, one of the board's recent crowning achievements is the "net-zero" Basalt Vista affordable-housing project in Basalt, which uses as much electricity as it produces thanks to solar panels and specially built heating and cooling systems.

"We can't rely on the federal government to fix this problem," said Commissioner George Newman, noting the Trump administration's rollback of rules governing clean air, clean water, coal power plants and auto emissions. "We have to rely on states, counties and businesses to solve it."

Two commissioners disclosed their longstanding commitment to fighting climate change before Wednesday's special meeting even got underway.

Board Chairman Greg Poschman called himself "an advocate for the climate" and said he'd studied solar technology in the '80s and installed solar panels on the roof of his home two years ago. He also noted that he lives in Brush Creek Village and will look directly at the solar farm.

In a lengthy statement he read as the meeting began, Commissioner Steve Child said he actually identified the Aspen Sanitation District site as an ideal location for a solar farm in about 2013 or 2014 after he was elected commissioner. He said he thought the county might be interested in building a solar farm, but couldn't drum up any interest from city or county officials.

Child also said he'd studied using wind, water and solar power on ranches he owns in Snowmass and near Denver.

"I've been a longtime advocate of combating climate change," Child said. "I believe it's an existentialist threat to the survival of humans and animals on Earth."

The disclosure prompted condemnation from some attendees in the crowded meeting room who said Child should recuse himself from the solar farm discussions. Child later said he'd consulted the county attorney about recusal, though he remained part of the board's decision Wednesday.

Joseph Sloves, who declined to say where he lives, stood up and objected to Child's lengthy opening disclosure statement. He attempted to argue with Poschman and other board members, who said public comment would come later in the meeting.

"If you don't sit down, we will have you removed," Newman said to him.

"Try me," Sloves said.

"Don't tempt me," Newman shot back.

The solar farm will be a joint project among Holy Cross Energy, the Aspen Sanitation District and Renewable Energy Systems, an international green-energy company with offices in Broomfield.

The Sanitation District will lease to RES 35 of the 55 acres it owns southeast of the intersection of Brush Creek Road and Highway 82 to install the 18,000 solar panels that will track the sun each day from east to west. The district previously used the site for 30 years to dispose of treated wastewater under an Environmental Protection Agency permit, said Bruce Matherly, sanitation district manager.

That former industrial use coupled with the fact that the site is under the flight path for Aspen's airport, has year-round solar exposure and is within half-a-mile of Holy Cross transmission lines made it an ideal spot for the solar farm, according to supporters of the project.

The farm is expected to generate 5 megawatts of power, which would be transferred to the transmission lines via an underground connector line Holy Cross will build. That amount of electricity would power about 900 homes, Hannegan said Wednesday.

The Sanitation District spends about $280,000 a year on electricity to treat wastewater, Matherly said. In exchange for providing the land, the district will receive lease payments and a 33% energy credit from Holy Cross that will grow in future years and save customers money, he said.

RES estimates that the facility will cost between $6.2 million and $7.2 million to build, said Conor Goodson, RES spokesman. The company is currently in talks with investors to provide that financing, he said. RES officials have said it would take about six months to construct.

Hannegan said he thinks the project probably won't break ground until spring and that it will likely be up and running possibly by early fall 2020. The project will help Holy Cross, which will have an option to buy the solar farm in 10 years, achieve its goal of making 70% of the power it provides come from renewable energy by 2030.

The idea for the project came from the communities served by Holy Cross, who voiced a desire for clean energy, Hannegan said. In fact, 69% of Holy Cross customers said they'd support a community-based solar project.

The utility studied about 20 different projects and the solar farm approved Wednesday was "by far the best," he said.

As happened in the Planning and Zoning meetings on the solar farm application this summer, those who opposed the project denounced it as an affront to cherished views, though many also volunteered support for renewable energy.

Sloves said the solar farm will mar the Entrance to Aspen and asked commissioners to put the issue to a vote. Alan Altman called the project a "fiasco," accused Holy Cross of spreading "misinformation" and chastised Child for not recusing himself.

"The hypocrisy of this … has made this process somewhat of a sham," Altman said.

Supporters included Chris Davenport, an accomplished big-mountain skier, environmental activist and valley resident, who said the solar farm site is "being served on a silver platter" and that commissioners risked looking like hypocrites in light of their climate pronouncements if they denied the project.

Oliver Fox-Rubin, 10, of Basalt told commissioners he wanted to speak to those who think the solar farm "is an eyesore." Climate change is "an existential threat," he said, and that if he had to choose between wildfires like Lake Christine last summer and solar panels, he'd choose the panels.

"We need to act and we need to act now," Fox-Rubin said. "The solar farm is … important to our very existence."

Interestingly, a point made by Altman and another opponent of the project, Jerry Scheinbaum, about hiding the solar farm behind landscaping and berms later helped commissioners decide how to solve that issue.

"Why shade them with landscaping and berms?" Scheinbaum said. "Let everybody see this. If you celebrate solar, let us see what you're doing."

County planners had been talking about applying for a variance to increase the berm height beyond the 4 feet now allowed to better block views of the farm from the Rio Grande Trail. But Child reminded his colleagues that making the solar farm visible shows Pitkin County's commitment to renewable energy and the progressive thinking behind it, and that they should be proud of people seeing it.

"I agree we shouldn't shield the solar farm from the Rio Grande Trail," he said. "We don't need to hide it from the people."

Newman agreed, and the board decided that berms shielding the project from the trail won't be more than 4 feet tall.

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