

**Staff Writer**

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## **Solar power in Carbondale: An update**

Guest Editorial

By Randy Udall

Carbondale is rapidly turning into one of Colorado's hottest markets for solar power. In the last year, new systems have been installed at Sopris Park, Thunder River Lodge, American National Bank, the new fire station, and at numerous other sites throughout town.

Last fall, 80 percent of Carbondale voters approved a ballot proposal to issue \$1.5 million in Clean Renewable Energy Bonds (CREBs). In the months since, the Town Council, Joani Matranga, myself, Mayor Michael Hassig, Michael Kennedy and many others have explored a number of alternative sites for installing the two largest solar systems in western Colorado.

After much analysis, our current goal is to install a 150-kilowatt system at Colorado Rocky Mountain School and a 50-kilowatt system at the old Carbondale Elementary School, which the town hopes to purchase from the school district. The first system would be installed this fall, the second next year.

The original intent was to use CREBs to finance the two systems. As we did more investigation and analysis, it became clear that tapping private capital, rather than public bonds, could be a more cost-effective approach to financing these systems. That's because the federal tax code offers substantial tax credits to private owners of solar systems that are not available to municipal governments. Using private capital rather than public financing dramatically reduces the town's financial exposure, while ensuring that the systems are installed as planned.

After much discussion, the Aspen Skiing Co. has agreed to finance the solar system at Colorado Rocky Mountain School. The Aspen Skiing Co. is a logical partner, since it has previously installed solar systems at the top of Aspen Highlands and on the Thunder River Lodge (which the company is converting to employee housing) here in Carbondale. The solar system at CRMS will be located on one half acre of the school's campus south of Dolores Way.

Once SkiCo and CRMS finalize their agreement, and a local contractor is selected, ground will be broken this fall. The system should be operational by Thanksgiving.

Installing the 50-kilowatt solar system at the old Carbondale Elementary School is contingent upon the town purchasing that property from Re-1. The current plan is to design this solar system as a shading structure for the parking lot north of the existing building, which will be converted into a nonprofit center. The Town Council has not decided who will finance this second system. The town has the option to issue Clean Renewable Energy Bonds for that purpose, or it could ask the Aspen Skiing Co. or other private companies to step in. The town is also investigating whether the Delaney property might be a suitable site for a third large solar system in the future.

It's worth mentioning that Xcel Energy customers in Carbondale can take advantage of utility rebates and federal tax credits to install solar systems on their property. In a related development, Holy Cross Energy, which serves 40,000 customers in the Roaring Fork and Eagle Valleys, has agreed to add an additional \$200,000 to its solar rebate pool for 2007. CORE also has rebates available for both solar electric and solar hot water systems. Solar has never been more cost effective. Interested customers should contact one of a number of competent, capable solar installers, including Sunsense, Grounded Renewable Energy, Sol Power and Inpower. All of these companies are based in Carbondale.

Solar is one of the world's fastest-growing energy industries. Here in Colorado, Carbondale has installed far more solar power than any community our size, and with the citizens' help we can continue to expand our lead.

(Randy Udall is a Carbondale resident and the executive director of the Community Office for Resource Efficiency.)