

Solar array a link in Northern New Mexico renewable energy push

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The Taos County commissioners gave a 7.7-acre solar array near State Road 522 the go-ahead during a public hearing Aug. 30. It represents the most recent addition to an overall strategy to increase the amount of renewable energy produced locally in Northern New Mexico.

Glen Tarleton, a managing partner of the company behind the array, applied for the solar facility to be built off of Valencia Road on the 58-acre Tarleton Ranch subdivision, which is mostly empty lots and sagebrush. The commission approved the plan, which calls for 3,888 solar panels expected to produce 1.2 to 1.3 megawatts of solar energy.

Commissioner Mark Gallegos was absent from the hearing, while all other commissioners voted in favor of the project, upholding a prior decision of the Taos County planning commission.

Energy from the array will be sold directly to Kit Carson Electric Cooperative, the sole electricity provider in Taos County.

Ambitious solar plan

The Tarleton array is a link in Kit Carson's plan to create a system of "distributed generation." The plan calls for many small solar arrays dotted across the Kit Carson service area, feeding solar energy into the grid that primarily relies on wholesale power.

Earlier this summer, Kit Carson agreed to pay \$37 million to buy itself out of a 40-year contract with Tri-State Generation and Transmission, which was criticized as limiting the co-op's renewable energy production to only 5 percent of its overall energy profile. Kit Carson has signed a 10-year contract with Guzman Renewable Energy Partners for electricity purchases, though the details of that contract have not been disclosed.

The co-op has indicated that, armed with the more flexible Guzman contract, it will begin to pursue more local solar energy production. Kit Carson CEO Luis Reyes told

The Taos News in July the co-op has plans for three small arrays — in Angel Fire, Eagle Nest and Picuris Pueblo — in addition to the Tarleton Ranch solar project. About 3 percent of the coop's total power is generated from eight solar arrays in Taos County.

Mark Yaravitz, the representative for the project, said he learned through conversations with the co-op that Kit Carson plans to do 20 to 25 such arrays over the next decade.

While "solar capital of the world" is a popular moniker for Taos, the Tarleton array met resistance from some neighbors, who largely argued a solar generation plant was inconsistent with the agricultural and residential character of the area.

One speaker at the Aug. 30 meeting said the public hearing process was skewed to favor the recommendation from the county's planning department, which recommended approval of the project and said it had a "low impact" visually and in terms of maintenance and traffic.

"The existing view sheds will have little or no impact as a result of the [solar array]... It is also the planning director's determination that the development being proposed is suitable to the land and the neighborhood character," read the staff recommendation.

The commission was convinced by the planning department's assessment. "There's no continuing traffic, no light, no noise," said commissioner Tom Blankenhorn. "I'm also generally comfortable with [t] he visual impact," he said.

While the commission approved the major development permit, it did so with 23 conditions the applicant must meet before, during and after construction, including halting work in the event archeological objects are found and returning the land to its natural state in the event the project is abandoned.

The commission also required the Tarleton array to mitigate the visual impact to the area by burying power lines rather than installing them overhead. The commission also gave the planning department the leeway to require additional screening on the 2,400 feet of chain-link fence surrounding the array, with a determination being made after construction is completed.

According to the application for the project, the Tarleton array has potential financing from the USDA as well as two local banks, to the tune of about \$2 million — though Yaravitz said the applicant is "still shopping the loan" and was waiting for final approval before continuing with negotiations.

Yaravitz also argued the construction of the project would generate approximately \$175,000 in gross receipts tax (GRT), while the array itself would generate approximately \$20,000 in property taxes annually.

Edward Vigil, director of the planning department, told the commission the array is expected to be operational within four months.



Taos County Commissioner Candyce O'Donnell surveys an empty subdivision near State Road 522, which will be the site of a 3,888-panel, 1.2 megawatt solar array. The Taos County Commission approved the project Aug. 30.

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