

Local Infrastructure: Solar Energy in the Estes Valley

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

Mother Nature is angry, and she is demanding our attention. Climate change is causing our warm seasons to be warmer, our water supply to shrink, and our weather patterns to be more turbulent. Hurricanes are more frequent and powerful. Wildfires are worsening in the west. Most of us have heard the phrase “Think globally, act locally.” That is, the climate crisis is global, and there are things we can do locally to make a difference.

Some local infrastructure ideas include more safe access for walkers, hikers and bikers as alternatives to driving. Another is looking at just how much greenhouse gas emissions our community is generating with our buildings. How much solar are we using for our government facilities? Estes Park Town Hall? Zero solar. Community Center? Zero solar. Fire station? Zero solar. School buildings? Zero solar.

To its credit our community does have some Electric Vehicle Charging stations. Some homeowners have chosen to install PV and we are seeing some solar installations on commercial enterprises, like hotels, and churches, like the Estes Park United Methodist Church.

According to an October 2019 article from newscientist.com “The green economy has grown so much in the US that it employs around 10 times as many people as the fossil fuel industry – despite the past decade’s oil and gas boom.” This is good news, that we can make energy choices that increase jobs, and help the economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We have talked in this column about architecture’s promise in producing buildings that substantially cut greenhouse emissions. The average traditionally built building represents 70% of electric use and produces up to 1/3 of greenhouse gas emissions.

An upcoming resource our community can use to learn more about solar possibilities is the 25th Annual National Solar Tour September 28th to October 4th. This year the tour is virtual. This annual tour gives us the opportunity to see what can and is being done by individuals and communities across the United States to invest in clean energy. It is easy to RSVP and free to attend all the scheduled programs. Each weekday is dedicated to a topic, such as Electric Vehicle Day (9/28), Solar Homeowner Day (9/29), Solar Business Day (9/30), Solar Schools Day (10/1), and Community Building Day (10/2). The complete schedule with program times is available on the website nationalsolartour.org. The solar projects for our home as well as the Estes Park United Methodist Church, both of which are net zero electric use, will be among the virtual video solar open houses on October 3rd and 4th. In the past our off-grid home in Estes Park was one of the homes included on this tour produced in part by the American Solar Energy Society (ASES) of which TW Beck Architects is a member.

Because of the large number of sunny days our state enjoys solar infrastructure is well suited to help us transition away from fossil fuel consumption. Let’s encourage our community to invest in solar. The ROI can be measured not only in number of years in which these systems will pay for themselves, but in paying forward a planet on which future generations can thrive.

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