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Belmar project goes solar

Developer plans large panels atop parking garages

By John Rebchook, Rocky Mountain News
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Belmar boasts wind turbines on top of street lights, solar-powered parking meters and some of the most energy-efficient commercial buildings in Denver.

Continuum Partners, the Denver-based developer of the former Villa Italia mall site at West Alameda Avenue and Wadsworth Boulevard, is exploring taking Belmar's green features to the next level.

Continuum is in the preliminary stages of working with Cherry Creek-based Hereford Capital Advisors to incorporate a large solar energy plant into the development.



Belmar parking garage

"We're incredibly excited about this," said Liza Prall, of Continuum. "We really pride ourselves at being at the forefront of green development. This is really pioneering."

The idea is to construct 190,000 square feet of "solar arrays" - strings of solar photovoltaic panels - on top of four parking garages at Belmar.

The plan is for the system to supply all the electricity for the garages and sell the excess energy it generates back to the grid.

It would produce enough electricity, about two megawatts, to power the equivalent of at least 350 homes annually, experts estimate.

The proposed project is part of Xcel Energy's Solar Rewards program and would help the giant utility meet the renewable energy standards required by Amendment 37, said John Hereford, principal of his namesake renewable energy development company.

Aaron Nelson of the nonprofit Colorado Alliance for Sustainable Colorado said Gov. Bill Ritter has made renewable energy a priority in Colorado, "and this is an example of business leading us down that path."

Hereford said garage-mounted solar arrays are becoming increasingly popular in California, but none approaches this size.

While many people don't realize it, parking garages are energy hogs, he said.

"When you think about it, they run their lights 24-7, and they need a lot of power for HVAC and ventilation systems," he said.

He doesn't know the cost of the solar plant. It's too expensive to use the solar energy generated for other buildings at Belmar.

"With the combination of tax credits, accelerated depreciation, and the sale of renewable energy credits and the sale of electricity back to the grid, we think it should prove to provide a slim, but acceptable return, on the investment," Hereford said.

If the plan moves forward, it could serve as a model for similar systems in Colorado, he said.

Powerful parking

Preliminary details of putting a huge solar array on top of the parking lots at Belmar.

- **What is being analyzed?** 190,000 square feet of solar arrays, or string of solar panels, on four parking garages at Belmar. Some arrays might have 850 panels; others might have up to 1,400, for example.
- **How big is 190,000 square feet?** That's the size of the Petroleum Building on the 16th Street Mall and approaches the size of many Wal-Mart Super Centers.
- **Why does it work?** Colorado gets more than 300 days of sunshine annually, and the garages are situated so they can take advantage of southern exposures.
- **Problem with solar power that few people consider:** Shadows from nearby buildings can decrease the amount of sunlight hitting the arrays.
- **How much is the 2 megawatts of electricity from the arrays?** The conservative answer is enough to supply electricity for 350 homes a year. Others estimate it could be enough for 500 or more homes.

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