

Residents with solar could see new charge

By David DeMille
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ST. GEORGE — Falling costs have encouraged more St. George residents to go solar, but some of the associated costs to the city's municipal power utility could result in a new fee for those trying to go green.

The city council gave verbal approval Thursday to the idea of imposing a capacity fee for solar installations, aiming to offset funding issues that managers say have developed out of the city's "net metering" program, which requires the city to purchase any existing power that homeowners generate but can't use themselves.

Sixty-three of the some 28,000 customers on St. George's grid have solar sys-

tems installed, but they can generate about a megawatt of power between them, enough to raise concerns about whether the net metering program pays solar customers too much for the excess power they generate, said Rene Fleming, conservation coordinator for the city.

She recommended a monthly capacity charge that would increase incrementally based on system size, although no set dollar amount had been figured.

Fleming said it would take a 3- to 6-month analysis to come up with the numbers, which would then have to be approved by the city council, although she estimated that it would likely not exceed \$10. All city customers pay a \$15.65 monthly base charge.

People with solar systems on their homes within the city typically stay con-

nected to the power grid, allowing them to purchase power from the city as needed or for the city to buy off excess power generated at the property.

But the city pays the full retail price for the solar-produced power, creating what utility managers have said amounts to a subsidy for solar production, which is already buoyed by state and federal tax credits.

Retail rates are developed to account for the costs of capital investments or infrastructure like work crews and power lines, but the city doesn't receive the benefits of such facilities when it buys back solar-generated power, leading to worries that those costs are being transferred to other customers.

"If they don't want to participate in the program, they can put solar on and totally disconnect from the grid," Fleming said. "But if they want to stay tied to the grid they need to do so in a manner that is equitable."

Some residents in attendance questioned whether an additional charge would take into account various benefits provided by solar, and whether the city should be making a move that could provide less incentive for residents to install solar.

But Fleming said interest in solar would likely be picking up regardless because of declining costs.

According to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the cost of putting solar panels on the typical American house has fallen some 70 percent over the past 15 years, and thanks to many state and federal incentives — including a 30 percent federal tax credit — the market for solar has picked up.

It's become a major issue nationally and globally, as utilities have started to question whether the incentives they've offered for solar development are still worth the cost.

Solar advocates argue that utilities are actively trying to create barriers for green energy development because they are only looking at the costs instead of considering the larger societal benefits of further green energy development.

Nearby Washington City is considering its own changes to its net metering program.

A similar issue is still playing itself out at the state level, with the Utah Public Service Commission deciding earlier this year to reject a proposal from utility company Rocky Mountain Power that would have imposed a fee on net metering users. Instead, a comprehensive study has been commissioned looking into the costs and values of having solar on the state's grid.

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The St. George City Council gave verbal approval Thursday to the idea of imposing a capacity fee for solar installations, aiming to offset funding issues that managers say have developed out of the city's "net metering" program.

Student's GoPro video wins him a national scholarship

For The Spectrum & Daily News

Mountain Heights Academy student Asher Layton was recently awarded a scholarship from the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education to attend the Big Ideas Fest in San Francisco for his GoPro video, "Water in the Desert: The Effects of Extreme Weather on Southern Utah."

The 6th annual conference is currently at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco through Dec. 10. During the conference, Asher and his Mountain Heights Academy teacher, Sara Layton, will present his video to national and international educators.

Asher Layton, a Mountain Heights Academy 10th grade student, devel-

oped his video for teacher Sara Layton's "GoPro Challenge Curriculum," which she began implementing in her syllabus earlier this year as a tool for students to document how national issues affect students on a personal or local level.

"Water in the Desert: The Effects of Extreme Weather on Southern Utah," uses before and after footage from September's flash flooding in Santa Clara to show how extreme weather in the recent past has affected the people and landscape in this region.

ISKME's sixth annual Big Ideas Fest is "a global gathering of mavericks and change-makers in education coming together for a 3-day immersion into collaboration and design."



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