Project Name:

# FORT COLLINS COMMUNITY SOLAR PILOT

## Combining energy efficiency with solar for the LMI community

Size:
64 $kW_{AC}$

Location:
518 N Loomis Ave, Fort Collins, CO 80521

# of LMI customers:
25 households

Project Websites:
*Original program model:* https://www.fcgov.com/utilities/img/site_specific/uploads/17-10793_Solar_Affordability_Program_Brochure_Final.pdf
*Current utility affordability programs:* https://www.fcgov.com/utilities/manage-your-account/payment-options/utilities-affordability-portfolio

**BEST PRACTICES**

- State grants or other state funding

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## Overview

In 2015, Fort Collins Utilities developed the Solar Affordability Program (SAP) with funding and support from the Colorado Energy Office (CEO) and GRID Alternatives (GRID). This project was a part of a Low-Income Community Solar Demonstration Project to explore the feasibility of 100% low-income community solar models that decreased the energy burden of LMI households. The findings from the SAP are documented in a comprehensive report issued in December 2017. SAP was Fort Collins' first effort to bring together solar energy, energy efficiency, education and financial assistance into one structure, and became Colorado's first rooftop community solar project dedicated to serving income-qualified residents.

Fort Collins Utilities worked with CEO and GRID to develop a 64 kW community solar array that originally served up to 25 low-income and heating payment assistance qualified customers. The array is installed on a warehouse building owned by the City of Fort Collins and was energized in 2017. The total project duration (from initial conversation to subscriber cost savings) was approximately 15 months.

The total project cost of $195,000 was financed via $65,000 from CEO with the remainder contributed by Fort Collins Utilities funding approved by City

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Council. Fort Collins Utilities performs the billing and program administration. The City of Fort Collins provided a warehouse rooftop. GRID operates and maintains the array.

The original program structure provided SAP solar credits to a selected group of eligible customers for a one year period. Subscribers were also required to pursue energy efficiency programs and take part in education opportunities. The goal of this approach is to secure permanent energy savings for these customers. Four milestones are required and involve working with these programs: Colorado Energy Office Weatherization Assistance Program, Solar Affordability Program, GRID's programs, and Larimer County Conservation Corps Water and Energy Assessment. Various state and local agencies assist subscribers in navigating an optimal path through available offerings and to get approved for the solar pilot.

Outreach and marketing were conducted by reaching out to over 200 LEAP (Larimer County's Low-Income Energy Assistance Program) households, focusing on those that use electric heat. The SAP program model limited benefits for one year per subscriber, which allows different households to benefit by rotating into the community solar program. SAP's subscribers are selected using a random selection process.

Subscribers paid Fort Collins Utilities the retail rate for electricity used, plus a fixed monthly charge of $6.14 (as of 2017). A bill credit for the subscriber's share of the solar production was provided each month. The retail rate increased annually, but the bill credits increased at the same rate. Subscribers saved roughly $30 per month.

In 2018, Fort Collins Utilities implemented an Income Qualified Assistance Program (IQAP) rate structure for eligible low-income customers that provides a 23% discount on all electric charges. This more systematic approach superseded the SAP by providing more savings to an order of magnitude more customers. The SAP was adapted to provide a one-time annual bill credit spread across all IQAP participants. This reduced the annual benefit to each customer to approximately $10; applying this as a one time credit enables the credit to be highlighted in the ongoing newsletter communications with IQAP customers.

# Innovative Approaches

- Combining energy efficiency and solar. For Fort Collins Utilities, it was critical to combine community solar with energy efficiency services. The community solar bill benefit was only for customers who participated in a structured energy efficiency and education process that ensured energy savings are permanent. The program aligned customer and home types with available no or low-cost efficiency options and specifically looked for households with electric heat. In addition, Fort Collins Utility worked with the programs of Larimer County, Energy Outreach Colorado, and CEO weatherization program to ensure that mobile, single-family, and multi-family households had customizable energy efficiency education and upgrades.

- "Barn-raising" community development model. The project was implemented using this model where subscribers donated 16 hours of sweat equity and worked alongside GRID and Fort Collins Utilities.

## Lessons Learned

- Since the community solar project is considered a generation asset of Fort Collins Utilities, the community was concerned that the project must benefit all ratepayers. This was resolved by the energy conservation and efficiency education portion of the program.


This case study is a part of the LIFT Toolkit initiative. To explore more case studies and best practices visit LIFT.Groundswell.org
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