

Palm Springs' solar-powered trash compactors raise awareness

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By JULIA GLICK
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Creative solar energy projects are taking root under the hot desert sun, with cities and companies proposing to power everything from trash compactors to a supermarket to an entire luxury development using the sun's rays.

The most noticeable, and perhaps the mascot, of the projects is the BigBelly, a solar-powered trash compactor that Palm Springs installed downtown at the end of April. The city is testing four compactors, which use the sun's energy to compress garbage into handy 40-pound bricks, cutting down on trash collection along with manpower and carbon emissions.

"These are an eco-friendly way of disposing of the trash," said Assistant City Manager Troy Butzlaff. "Hopefully, people will realize that solar power does have a place in our society, and even at this level, solar can help."



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Above: Jeffrey Axelrod, 62, of Sausalito, passes a solar-powered trash compactor at Tahquitz Canyon and South Palm Canyon drives in Palm Springs.

Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise

While solar power might seem like a no-brainer in the scorching Coachella Valley, high prices for the technology have discouraged many residents and groups from adopting it until the past few years, he said. But new subsidies along with falling costs and the rising rates for traditional sources of energy could encourage more homes and businesses to install solar panels, Butzlaff said.

"The trash compactors have a public outreach value," said physics professor David Tanenbaum, who teaches an energy policy course at Pomona College. "Something high-profile that's sustainable makes a statement."

Critics have long questioned the cost-efficiency of solar power and whether it can be made affordable and feasible on a large scale, he said. Wind energy is still about two to three times more cost-effective than most solar panels, but solar is more practical for individual use and prices are coming down, he said. Also, a growing number of people now are willing to pay a premium to feel better about their energy consumption, he said. As the market grows and research progresses, solar prices may drop further, he added.

Palm Springs hopes the BigBelly compactors, which cost about \$4,500 each, will pay for themselves by conserving labor and gas, Butzlaff said. It could mean the trash truck would come by about twice a week instead of roughly twice a day, he added. If all goes well in the 90-day trial period, the city will install the compactors, which resemble jumbo mail collection boxes, throughout its downtown, he said.

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LEFT: The city is testing four compactors that use the sun's energy to compress garbage into 40-pound bricks, reducing trash collection.

The trash compactors come as the city is accepting applications for members for a new Resource Conservation Commission, which could pursue similar initiatives, Butzlaff said.

In Desert Hot Springs, a developer is set to negotiate a development agreement for Palmwood, a massive residential and retail complex that proposes to use solar energy to power streetlights, golf carts and hundreds of homes. The project could serve as a model in using renewable energy sources, said Bill Bruce, Palmwood's technology director.

The Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival last month featured solar-powered art installations with built-in solar panels. Builders started construction last month on a Stater Bros. supermarket in Palm Desert that the company says will feature a more low-tech form of solar power, solar tubes, skylights that light the store with natural sunlight.

Over the past few years, the Desert Water Authority and Cathedral City have installed arrays of solar panels to power their facilities. Palm Desert recently required new housing tracts to include at least one model home with a solar system, and to offer buyers the option of adding such a system to their homes.

The Coachella Valley has some of the best solar potential in the world because of its strong, constant sun and few cloudy days, Tanenbaum said.

Reach Julia Glick at 760-837-4418 or jglick@PE.com

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