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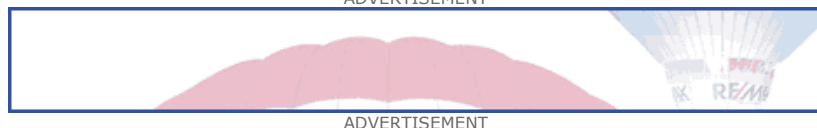
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Sunday July 02, 2006

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Power to people

Program energizes paybacks to customers

**By JOHN NORTON
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

Hoping to meet its requirements for solar-generated power as soon as possible, Aquila is offering up-front rebates to customers that can cover more than half the cost of a photovoltaic system.

The Public Utilities Commission on Wednesday approved Aquila's plan to meet the requirements of Amendment 37, which voters approved in 2004 to require more renewable energy in the state.

Under the amendment, power companies must get 3 percent of their electricity from renewable resources and, of that amount, 4 percent must be from solar systems.

Most of the renewable power will come from wind energy and Aquila is counting on the growing number of wind farms in Xcel Energy's portfolio. Xcel provides most of the power Aquila sells its 92,000 customers in Southern Colorado, so that will count in the assessment.

Half of the solar energy companies can count must come from its own customers, whose photovoltaic systems can carry much of their own load and, in many cases, return surplus power to the grid. The other half will come from larger systems like the one Xcel is planning to use in the San Luis Valley.

Kenny Romero, who set up the solar program for Colorado Springs Utilities, joined Aquila to develop the program here. He said that Aquila's program of rebates is more generous than other companies' in an effort to get as many people on


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line as soon as possible.

Under Aquila's plan, customers who purchase photovoltaic systems will receive \$2 for every watt of power the system generates. Aquila spokesman Roger Kort uses the Colorado Renewable Energy Society's estimate that a 3,000-square-foot house would need a 3-kilowatt system, running about \$27,000.

In addition to the equipment rebate, customers will get an up-front renewable energy credit of \$4 for every watt, so such a system would mean a rebate of \$18,000, which they could deduct from the cost of the system.

Romero said that Aquila must approve the plans for the system and inspect it after it's installed, to make sure that it was done safely and in a way that it maximizes efficiency. "We want to make sure it's not facing north, for example," he said.

More information, forms and names of contractors can be found on the Web site Aquila has set up for the program. Romero said that the company is trying to encourage people to make inquiries online.

He said that the \$6 total rebate will be good for the first 40 kilowatts that's generated. After that, the renewable energy credit drops to \$3 from \$4 and there are more reductions as Aquila moves closer to the Amendment 37 solar mandate. By comparison, Xcel offers a \$2.50 renewable energy credit.

The money for the rebate programs and efforts to promote them come from a 1 percent surcharges on electricity bills.

Customers who already have solar systems in place, installed prior to Dec. 1, 2004, will only receive the renewable energy credit.

Customers who live within Aquila's certification area can get rebates for solar systems.

Kort said that would include people who live in the mountains around Canon City or the Cripple Creek and Victor area, whose homes are within Aquila's service area but because of remoteness have never actually connected to the grid. Some of them are already using solar systems, and if they meet Aquila's requirements, those customers can get the \$4-a-watt renewable energy credit.

Aquila customers who live outside the certificated area do not qualify for the program, he added.

Along with the up-front payments, customers with solar



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systems whose homes are connected to the grid can earn credit against their power bills and even receive payments if they generate more electricity over the year than they use, a policy that predates Amendment 37.

When a photovoltaic system is turning out more energy than the home is using , the surplus goes out on the grid and the meter reverses, deducting kilowatt hours from the usage for that month. If, after a year, more power went out than came in the homeowner can be paid for that energy at the wholesale rate.

Romero said that Aquila has trained its staff on how the program works, and has been meeting with renewable energy system vendors and contractors to let them know the financial incentives. They've also met with building inspectors to make sure they know what to look for in installations.

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