

THE DAILY CAMERA

Shelter is basking in the sun's power

By Ryan Morgan, Camera Staff Writer
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The Boulder Homeless Shelter's mission is to give those without other options respite from the elements. But starting this week, the elements — specifically, the sun — will help provide some of the nonprofit's electric power.

Workers are installing 64 photovoltaic panels on the shelter's roof using a \$50,000 grant from Xcel Energy's Renewable Energy Trust. Those panels will produce electricity and help the shelter spend a little bit less on its electric bill so it can spend a little bit more money to fight homelessness.

Work crews from contractor Namaste Solar Electric started work on the project Monday and expect to be finished by the end of the week.

Greg Harms, the shelter's executive director, said planners designed the building to accommodate solar panels when it was built in 2003.

Solar power also fits in well with the shelter's other renewable-energy technology, he said.

For example, the shelter's temperature is controlled by pipes that carry water underground, where — depending on the season — it's either heated or cooled by the Earth's ambient temperature. The GeoExchange system, as it's known, doesn't use any natural gas. Not having to rely on the suddenly expensive commodity has been a lifesaver, Harms said.

"No one really knew what would happen with the price of natural gas," which has nearly tripled in price since the shelter was built, Harms said. "But it did make us look smart."

The system does rely on electric pumps, however. Harms said the new solar-electric system will help reduce the amount of power the shelter has to buy from Xcel Energy.

"This is going to help us reduce our electric bill," he said. "But how much, we're not sure."

The system could help the shelter save as much as \$5,000 a year on its electric bills, and Harms said that money then could be spent on his organization's main mission of helping homeless people.

The shelter in northwest Boulder gets plenty of sun, which is good. But Blake Jones, president of Namaste Solar Electric, said it also gets plenty of wind, which makes installing solar panels a challenge.

Because workers don't want to drill down into the roof of the shelter, they were using a "ballast system" — heavy weights — to hold the panels down.

That means they can't be placed at the optimum 30-degree angle that would capture the most sunlight, Jones said. But, he said, the panels will still capture a great deal of energy, especially during the summer.

Jones called the project "ideal," and said his employees were donating much of their labor to get it done.

He said the solar system will help the homeless shelter put a dent in its energy bills for years to come. Solar panels can easily last three decades with very little maintenance.

"For a nonprofit, this is a way of giving a gift that keeps on giving," Jones said.

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