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Scottsdale solar firm rethinking business model

Phoenix Business Journal - by [Patrick O'Grady](#)

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Solar generating systems seem to have come in one of two flavors over the past several years: extra large and extra small.

Utility-scale solar has been a dominant force, with plant sizes starting at 200 megawatts. Then there's distributed, or rooftop systems, which hit in the low-kilowatt range.

Robert Orsello — principal engineer and owner of **Triage Inc.**, a Scottsdale company that

designs and consults on solar projects — has founded a new venture called **Flux Energy GS** that's looking to make solar more of a neighborhood affair. The idea has some utilities rethinking their approach.

"I believe we have a design that is most forward-thinking," Orsello said.

Orsello's plan creates an architectural feature out of a concentrated solar tower. Capable of producing 10 to 100 megawatts of power, the plant can be used for communities, shopping centers or any central gathering place, he said.

The company already has about 12 people working on the project in various capacities.

The solution is fairly straightforward. Railcars with mirrors would travel around a central concentrating tower. By moving the mirrors to track the sun, Orsello's SunDial could harness power at peak intervals for most, if not all, of the day.

For storage, the system would use a single, slim tank that would operate on the principal similar to a home hot water heater. Higher temperature water would be at the top of the tank and could provide power generation after the sun goes down, he said.

The system also calls for a solar radiator under the mirrors to return heat to the ground. The system is a closed loop, meaning no water is wasted, Orsello said.

"We want to be a dry-air system," he said. "We don't want to use water to create

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electricity.”

Orsello estimates that the power plant would need about 3 to 4 acres of land per megawatt. A 10-megawatt unit would take about one-tenth of a square mile. With development cost estimated at \$4 a watt, or about \$4 million per megawatt (which is a million watts), a 10-megawatt plant would run about \$40 million. That’s cheaper than what’s currently on the market at \$6 to \$8 per installed watt.

Orsello has been experimenting with community-sized solar for some time. Triage designed a system for a development outside Tombstone that would provide power for homes and a water district in the community.

Flux Energy’s project is the next step. While the company is targeting housing developments, cities and county users — groups that, in some cases, may or may not be eligible for state and federal rebates — most of the interest has come from other sectors, Orsello said.

“Our goal is not to sell at the utility level, but so far they are the only groups coming forward,” he said.

That may reflect a rethinking of what it means to meet alternative energy mandates from the Arizona Corporation Commission. The benefit of a 200- to 300-megawatt power plant is that it can feed lots of power to the grid. The downside is the financing, running at \$1 billion or more depending on the type of plant, which has been a struggle amid the economic collapse.

[Arizona Public Service Co.](#) officials said they are looking at a broader portfolio of solar after a deal with Starwood Energy Group and Lockheed Martin Corp. fell through earlier this year. Last month, [Salt River Project](#) unveiled plans for a 20-megawatt photovoltaic plant that companies could buy into instead of placing the panels on their own roofs.

“Probably a year ago, I don’t think any of us thought we’d be talking about projects of this size,” said Lori Singleton, SRP’s manager of environmental initiatives.

Part of that has come from a drop in prices for some forms of solar, particularly photovoltaic. Those systems convert the sun’s light into energy directly instead of refocusing it.

While SRP is exempt from ACC’s requirement of producing 15 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2025 because it is a quasi-governmental agency outside the commission’s authority, the utility is looking for new ways to bring solar into its portfolio.

It is working out the logistics of bringing such plants online. SRP cannot take advantage of some of the federal incentives because of its governmental status.

That’s where having people buying into a solar system may be advantageous, Singleton said. “We’re hearing more and more about customers installing solar, but they can’t do it on their rooftops,” she said.

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