



Solar energy component maker coming to the Springs

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A small New Jersey company that makes equipment for huge solar power installations is setting up a manufacturing facility in Colorado Springs.

Olson Motor and Control manufactures solar combiner boxes — pieces of equipment that collect the power from individual solar panels and combine it, then send it on to first an inverter and then the power grid. President Bill Olson started the business 26 years ago as an electrical engineering and industrial control panel firm, then branched into the solar sphere six years ago.

The solar business has really taken off, Olson said, with his business doubling year-over-year.

"It's exploded the last two years," Olson said. "We're very excited about this."

Olson Motor and Control employs 12 people in New Jersey and is starting small in Colorado Springs, leasing a 3,200-square foot facility on Aerotech Drive near the Colorado Springs Airport that will employ three people. Olson said the facility should be running by April 1, assembling and shipping the company's combiner boxes, which typically go into very large, utility-scale solar power installations. Its products aren't used in residential solar installations.

The Aerotech location offers the company the potential to expand up to about 10,000 square feet and it hopes to eventually employ a dozen people in Colorado Springs.

"We found Colorado Springs to be a real sweet spot in terms of the location," said Ann Olson, the company's business and marketing manager and Bill's wife. "It's beautiful country, it's got easy access for transportation. We found the employee pool to be very rich there."

Because many states require power companies to meet goals for generating a percentage of their electricity from renewable sources, called a renewable portfolio standard, Bill Olson said the solar business looks to be strong for some time to come.

"With those mandates, you're looking at five to 10 years of solid growth," he said. "I don't think you're going to see it going away."

Colorado's renewable portfolio standard requires private energy companies, such as Xcel, to produce 30 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020 (as a municipal utility, Colorado Springs Utilities is required to produce 10 percent of its power from renewables by 2020, although CSU CEO Jerry Forte has said he supports setting a goal of 20 percent from renewables by 2020).

Ann Olson said having a branch facility in Colorado Springs puts the company's manufacturing closer to major solar energy projects in the Southwest and gives it a beachhead in the region.

"We are growing by leaps and bounds," she said. "It became very apparent to us that we needed a plant to address the western United States."

The Olsons praised the efforts of the Colorado Springs Regional Economic Development Corporation in pitching Colorado Springs as a destination. Mike Kazmierski, president and CEO of the EDC, said Olson Motor represents the type of company that the Springs is an attractive location for. The company didn't

receive any financial incentives to pick the Springs, he said, although it may qualify for enterprise zone tax credits based on future investment in the area.

“This is just an example of what we see in the suppliers and providers to the renewables industry that tends to fit pretty well in our environment, where we have quality workers and low cost of doing business,” Kazmierski said. “They’re not going to grow to be a thousand people (but) they’re going to grow to be a solid little company here.”

Kazmierski said the EDC is in talks with 14 other prospects in the renewable energy and clean technology fields, most of them small manufacturers like Olson.

“For now, it just shows that there is some traction in the clean tech area,” he said.

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