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Shade structures a bright spot for commercial solar

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Commercial solar installations may have a more promising future on covered parking lots and campgrounds, as well as shading walkways, rather than systems placed on building rooftops.

While the numbers show there has been a decline in commercial solar installs, officials with Arizona Public Service Co. don't see the commercial solar industry declining in the state. Marc Romito, the utility's renewable energy manager, said he sees it transitioning.

"With our low Valley desert area, there's a growing interest in commercial shade structures," Romito said. "That's a new trend that is taking off like crazy. Many have realized the economic value from shade. I see this as the next step in solar in the Valley."

One company riding this solar niche market is Strategic Solar Energy LLC in Chandler, whose main product is the PowerParasol.

Strategic Solar formed five years ago and spent a couple of years on design, installation and documentation.

It received its patent for the PowerParasol in September 2014, said President Bob Boscamp.

"What's different about our product is that we need to find a value proposition other than just energy," Boscamp said. "If all the incentives start peeling away, advertising and use of space underneath is an extra way to get money with our PowerParasols."

In 2010, the first PowerParasol was installed on 5.25 acres on Arizona State University's Lot 59 parking lot in Tempe. The shade structure covers 800 vehicle spots and so far it is on track to produce close to 4 million kilowatt-hours of power, Boscamp said. The added bonus is the parking lot has become a shaded space for tailgating and other events.

"Energy is not the No. 1 reason to install our PowerParasols," Boscamp said. "You



A PowerParasol structure above an ASU parking lot.

have to have other values you're trying to achieve. We just happen to have a very elegant shade structure that happens to generate a lot of electricity."

ASU's Tempe campus has two other PowerParasols, a 32-foot-high structure by the Memorial Union and a community parkway by ASU Gammage Auditorium.

"You don't feel like you're under an enclosure or bridge with our PowerParasols," Boscamp said. "The panels are arranged so considerable light will filter in so trees, plants and flowers can grow underneath."

Strategic Solar also installed a PowerParasol in 2013 above a parking lot of Fry's grocery store on Bell Road just west of Interstate 17. Two more PowerParasols are planned for new Fry's stores in the Valley, and a third will be built at an existing Valley store, Boscamp said.

Because of the PowerParasol, joint Fry's and ASU research found customers were driving further to shop at the store, felt safer parking at night because of the lighting and felt comfortable shopping during the day because it was cooler, he said.

JoEllen Lynn, public affairs director for Fry's Food Stores, said the company is pleased with the PowerParasols.

"We've seen lots of great results, includ-

ing reducing our cost for power," Lynn said.

Strategic Solar also is installing its PowerParasol on two acres at the Lazy Days Campground facility in Tucson for Campgrounds of America. It is expected to be finished in October.

Strategic Solar has several projects under negotiation, including some outside Arizona and internationally, and is looking at hundreds of millions of dollars in future projects, he said. Strategic Solar also is looking at licensing construction developers to build PowerParasols in other states, and recently signed its first deal with Empire Renewable Energy, a division of Empire-Cat, based in Mesa.

Although the company does not work with a specific solar panel manufacturer right now, it could sign an exclusive deal in the future with a company like Tempe-based First Solar Inc.

Utilities also could pay for the shade for companies in exchange for the energy produced, Boscamp said.

"Solar as a standalone offering will be challenged in Arizona with the net metering and the tariffs being changed," Boscamp said. "I feel very fortunate we've come up with a model that has something other than just energy."