

Hydro, solar projects planned for Pownal

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POWNAL -- If all goes as planned, the town may boast two green power production sites within the next few years -- a solar generation facility at the former Green Mountain Race Track and a hydro-electric plant on the Hoosic River.

Bids were opened Monday as part of a state program that would offer guaranteed higher rates for producers of solar, hydro, wind, or methane-based power facilities. The rates are above market value and vary depending on the type of energy, according to the Vermont Public Service Board.

The program contains a cap on the amount of power any one technology can produce at the higher rate, said John Spencer of Vermont Electric Power Production Inc.

Spencer said he is acting as facilitator for the program on behalf of the Public Service Board. He said that because so many solar projects had applied to exceed the cap, they had to be selected through a lottery.

Spencer said that one of the proposed solar projects would be located at the former track site off Route 7 near the Williamstown, Mass., line.

John Guerin, director of solar development at EOS Ventures, a Massachusetts company, said in an interview Friday that he has been speaking with Progress Partners, the track's owners, about developing the site. He said he could only speak in general terms, but the idea is to have a 2.2 megawatt solar facility under construction within the next three years.

Guerin said the cost of the facility has not been nailed down, and that his company is working on financing the project with the Berkshire Bank and other entities.

Guerin said the site is ideal for a solar facility because it has already been graded and substantial electrical infrastructure exists from its days as a horse and dog racing track.

He said that would reduce construction costs significantly.

EOS Ventures works primarily with wind power. Its solar projects generally provide power for specific facilities, Guerin said. The Pownal site would break from the company's norm in that the energy would be sold to the electricity grid under Vermont's energy program.

"We are very happy that Vermont is taking a leadership role in developing renewable energy," Guerin said.

Chic Paustian, an officer of Progress Partners, said that he could not comment on what is being planned for the track other than what is already public knowledge. In addition to the proposed solar facility, the track owners have said that a biomass facility might locate on the 144-acre property.

According to sources familiar with the discussions with town officials, the facility likely would be a wood pellet manufacturing plant.

The second potential green energy project to move forward this week is a proposed hydroelectric facility at the former Pownal Tanning Co. dam in North Pownal. That site once included generating equipment that provided power for the mill.

Lease agreement

It was announced at Thursday's Select Board meeting that the town has entered into a lease option agreement with Encore Redevelopment, a Burlington company that wishes to get the old hydro facility up and running again. Chad Farrell, founder of Encore Redevelopment, said that few companies applied for hydro projects, unlike solar, and he is confident that his will be approved, although it had yet to be confirmed as of Friday.

He said that his intent is to have the revived facility produce 700 kilowatts of power by using modern hydro-electric equipment.

The lease option agreement was needed to get the Encore project in the running for the state program, but it does not bind the town to anything solid, said board Chairman Nelson Brownell. What the site would pay in taxes and the town's share of the net profit has yet to be negotiated, he said. The lease agreement lays out a timeline for those negotiations to take place.

Brownell said neither of the two projects are likely to create a large number of jobs, but the real benefit to the town would lie in property tax revenue.

Brownell said the second project rumored to be headed for the track site may be a different story in terms of employment. Brownell said something involving wood processing makes the most sense, and Paustian has told the board that the facility would create 24 jobs.

Board member Don Prouty said that at a meeting on Oct. 16 Peter Howe, the owner of Silver Street Hydro, another company interested in the dam, opted out of negotiating with the town because of the pollution believed to be in the sediment behind it.

Prouty said that Howe felt the cost of cleanup would be prohibitive.

Farrell said his company specializes in developing polluted sites, specifically ones that are involved in the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields program, which the Pownal dam is.

Further testing would be required to determine the extent of the pollution and what would type of cleanup work would be needed.

The old factory in North Pownal was razed as part of a federal Superfund clean up project, but the pollution in sediment behind the dam is likely related to mills further upstream, possibly in Massachusetts, officials have said.

State Rep. Bill Botzow, D-Pownal/Woodford, said that electricity ratepayers will see a slight increase in costs under the incentive program, but the overall economic benefits from the increase in development would offset them.

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