

Solar Energy Gets A Boost In NY

GEORGE M. WALSH, Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — An array of shimmering panels covering 3 acres in New York's Finger Lakes is a sign of the state's latest push to catch up to its neighbors in the Northeast that have set the pace in recent years for promoting solar energy.

The project in Romulus that will produce much of the electricity for the Seneca County sheriff's department was funded in part with a grant of almost \$1 million from the state's NY-Sun program. The initiative by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration will provide tens of millions of dollars a year for public and private projects producing at least a megawatt of solar power, the equivalent of about 200 typical residential installations.

An initial round of competition in 2012 allocated \$30 million to 16 developers in New York City and the Hudson Valley who planned to put a total of 34 megawatts online by the end of this year.

One aim of NY-Sun is to help meet goals for increasing the share of the state's energy needs covered by renewable sources, now dominated by hydropower. Another is to close the gap with other states that moved more aggressively and quickly to encourage development of solar.

Massachusetts, for example, saw 129 megawatts of solar installed in 2012 compared to 60 in New York, according to an industry group. At the same time, 415 megawatts were installed in New Jersey, where regulatory policy created a system that has utilities effectively subsidizing solar owners to meet renewable energy standards.

"It quickly comes down to policies," said Michael Johnson, a California-based expert on funding such projects, who returned to his home county this month to help flip the switch on the Romulus system. "Every state does it their own way."

Developers say Massachusetts and Vermont outpaced New York, in part, because of more generous incentives for a wider range of projects.

They say New York limited subsidies to smaller residential and commercial projects until the launch of NY-Sun last year.

The program is run by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, which is funded mostly through assessments on utilities.

NYSERDA said that as of the end of this year and several rounds of awards, 299 megawatts of solar power had been brought online or were in development through NY-Sun. A total of \$126 million for 184 projects was awarded this year, the authority

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said.

"It's changed our business structure completely," said David Sandbank, president of OnForce Solar in the Bronx. "A lot of our jobs are in the boroughs. We have a lot of large roofs in the Bronx and Queens."

He said his company is working on several projects — including a 2.3-megawatt system for the town of Clarkstown in Rockland County — and is on a "hiring spree," with 50 employees at a headquarters where there were a dozen last year.

Projects approved under the program range from a 600-kilowatt system at convenience store chain Stewarts Shops manufacturing plant in Saratoga County to a 2.7-megawatt array at an Owens Corning insulation plant near Albany. There are projects at a Cummins Inc. engine plant in Chautauqua County, Cornell and Clarkson universities, a Jetro Cash & Carry restaurant supply depot in the Bronx and the Raymour & Flanigan furniture store chain in the Hudson Valley and Capital Region.

The 845-kilowatt project Johnson's company, Spear Point Energy, financed and built at the Seneca County Law Enforcement Center in Romulus is expected to save the county \$1 million over the course of a 25-year agreement that calls for the county to buy electricity generated by the array from Spear Point at rates that will be lower than local utility NYSEG. Under the "power purchase agreement," the company will operate and maintain the system for the county.

While NY-Sun was initiated by Cuomo to run through 2015, both chambers in the Legislature passed measures last year that would extend it for 10 years.

The goal was to give businesses more certainty about the future of the program, said Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, a Westchester County Democrat and Energy Committee chairwoman.

But the legislation stalled over disagreement about a provision in the Senate bill that would have provided incentives to attract manufacturers of solar energy components to set up shop in the state.

Paulin said she expects agreement on an extension during next year's session.

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