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Solar power looking up



RYAN MERCER, *Free Press*

Robert Fuller, owner of Leunig's Bistro and the building that houses it at the corner of College and Church streets in Burlington, stands on the roof where a solar panel array will soon be installed by Building Energy of Williston. ONLINE: For a panoramic rooftop view, go to www.burlingtonfreepress.com

By Joel Banner Baird
Free Press Staff Writer

It might qualify as a symbol: Frank Ammirato Jr.'s Westford barn emerged last week as Vermont's first site for a new incentive program for photovoltaic power.

The reality: Besieged by proposals and limited by a cap of 12.5 megawatts, the Public Service Department resorted last week to a

Lottery determines 16 sources of power to sell to utilities

lottery. Winners — Ammirato and 15 others out of 185 applicants — will receive 25-year, locked-in "feed-in tariffs" for the power they generate: 30 cents per kilowatt-hour from their respective

utilities.

What detractors say is the Vermont Legislature's sweetheart deal for investors translates into a modest contribution to the grid; when the solar projects come online, they will contribute about 1 percent of the state's appetite for electricity.

Supporters say the nation's first statewide feed-in tariff program is a promising start. Like

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SOLAR: Lottery determines 16 who'll sell power to utilities

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those in Germany and Spain — world leaders in solar production, even though the former receives about 20 percent less sunshine than Vermont — the program aims to stabilize and accelerate investment in alternative energy.

Although rate of the 30 cents per kilowatt-hour is high, it's not out of the ballpark. Utilities have paid that much — and more — on the summer spot market when demand (and solar production) spikes.

Projects by Central Vermont Public Service Corp. and Green Mountain Power Co. didn't make the lottery draw. But both utilities have policies calling for mixed energy portfolios, including (for the next decade or two) the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant and Hydro-Quebec.

Green Mountain Power's Web site, rich with pitches for solar, touts the advantages of "shaving" peak demand with renewable power generated closer to home (cheaper to distribute) and cleaner (fossil-fuel peak generation facilities typically are the industry's heaviest polluters).

"The program is an investment in our future," said Lawrence Mott, board chairman of Renewable Energy Vermont and managing director of New Generation Partners. "It's a way of avoiding 'crisis-planning' of the sort you see at Vermont Yankee."

Grid and bear it

Granted, Ammirato's 2.4-kilowatt rooftop array won't kick-start the New England grid after an ice storm. It won't provide him with a private source of electricity. Under the new program, he must sell it all to his utility.

Nor will the panels budge an electric meter after sunset. It won't have to. A total of 50 megawatts' worth of alternative energy (about 4 percent of the state's total need) has been set aside in the pay-in tariff program, divided among solar; wind; methane from landfills and farms; and small hydro.

Solar, with longer rates of return, garnered the highest premium rate. Landfill methane producers will receive the lowest: 12 cents per kilowatt-hour.

The Legislature laid the groundwork for the latest renewable power increase in June 2005 when it estab-



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Robert Fuller (left), owner of Leunig's Bistro and the building that houses it at the corner of College and Church streets in Burlington, stands on the roof with Free Press reporter Joel Banner Baird and Building Energy Vice President Basil Stetson. Fuller will invest in solar panels that Stetson's Williston company will install.

Solar's mainstream

Sixteen photovoltaic projects were selected at random from 185 projects designed to trim Vermont's reliance on expensive, out-of-state electricity during peak summer hours.

The list of project submissions, available for viewing on the Public Service Board Web site, illustrates a rich diversity of interest.

■ Burlington-based Pomerleau Real Estate, for instance, had 18 proposals (10 percent of the total), two of which made the final cut.

■ Hannaford Brothers Co., based in Scarborough, Maine, submitted 14 — and successfully landed one.

■ School districts, municipalities, investment partnerships and other fired-up families added to the mix.

■ See the list (as an Excel file) at: www.psb.vermont.gov.

lished the Sustainably Priced Energy Development Program (SPEED) program. In May, the Legislature gave SPEED the green light to launch feed-in tariffs.

The program is not a slam-dunk for solar developers, despite its incentives, SPEED Director John Spencer said.

"Looking at several other municipal programs, we've seen a very, very high drop-out rate," he said.

Before they can profit from arrays with feed-in tariffs, he added, developers face costs of the industrial-grade Act 248 permitting process: legal fees, engineering and environmental analyses; additional equipment; and yearly administrative fees.

In contrast, customers who net-meter their solar arrays (feeding electricity into their homes and businesses, and generating billing credits for the surplus)

face a relatively inexpensive and streamlined path to grid connectivity.

Friday, midafternoon sun pummeled the sloping roof of Leunig's Bistro. Owner Robert Fuller and Basil Stetson, a vice president of Williston-based Building Energy, emerged, squinting at the future home of a 26-kilowatt solar array — a project that drew a lucky seven in last week's lottery.

"It's something that will help me, and, I hope, will in-

spire others to do the same," Fuller said. "It's just the right thing to do."

After state rebates and federal state tax credits, the entire system will cost about \$95,000, said Nik Ponzio, a solar systems engineer at Building Energy. He estimates the array will generate about 28,000 kwh per year, or about 15 percent of Fuller's normal use.

Fuller will continue to pay his full monthly electric bill. But his roof-top utility will earn about \$8,400 annually — an 11 percent return on his investment.

In seven to 10 years, he said, he might just pay it off.

It's academic

Sometime next year, there's a good chance that students at Burlington's Hunt Middle School will witness the rise of a 450-kilowatt solar array on their roof — the project was the third to surface in the lottery.

It arose through a collaboration between Burlington-based New Generation Partners and the city's school board.

Make mine a suburban

If submissions to a new solar power program indicate a trend, malls and shopping centers — erstwhile icons of car culture — will soon sprout photovoltaic arrays.

Lining up to sell solar power to utilities at a premium rate, Burlington-based Pomerleau Real Estate submitted plans for plaza-top arrays in Colchester, Enosburg, St. Albans, Waterbury, Randolph, Milton and Essex. Two of Pomerleau's projects are in the approved queue: at Vergennes Center and the Old Navy store.

Although only one Hannaford supermarket drew a lucky lottery number, the chain has proposals for 13 more in Vermont.

The top end of Vermont's approved feed-in-tariff solar producers will occupy about 20 acres in South Burlington, east of Hinesburg Road and south of Meadowland Drive. Weighing in at 2.2 megawatts, it will generate about 1,000 times more power than a typical residential array.

John Larkin, the property's owner (and a major Chittenden County real estate developer), said he was moved to enter a proposal after several lively sessions with young business associates he called "the wiz kids."

Although photovoltaics lie outside his realm of expertise, Larkin said he found cultivating home-grown energy preferable to enforcing the country's access to foreign oil.

"This is like Maine selling lobsters," Mott said. "Solar power is a natural resource that we need to manage. If we don't, a lot of good jobs are going to end up in other places."

Jeff Forward, a Richmond resident, helped shepherd a similar project for Camels Hump Middle School.

"It was a really scary, \$1.5 million bond vote we had to put together," he said. The bond passed Oct. 6 by a ratio of more than 2-1.

Last week, Forward encountered a personal setback: a 30-kilowatt array he'd submitted for the feed-in tariff program came in 121st in the lottery drawing and stood little chance of making a waiting list. Nonetheless, he described the surge of prospective solar entrepreneurs as "stunning."

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