



Solar array powers ahead; 6-MW Amesbury site should be producing energy by year's end

30-acre site on Amesbury landfill should be producing energy by year's end
By Jim Sullivan Staff writer Sep 5, 2016

AMESBURY — The city's first commercial solar array — a 6-megawatt site on a capped South Hunt Road landfill — is on track to begin producing power before the end of the year.

John Harrington, the project manager overseeing construction of the site for Conti Group, said the \$10 million Citizens Energy solar array could potentially be operational by November.

"There is a good possibility that this site could be up and operational prior to Christmas of this year, and we expect it may be even prior to Thanksgiving," Harrington said. "These projects go very quickly."

The 30-acre array planned for the site of the capped Waste Management landfill at 56 South Hunt Road is projected to produce roughly enough electricity to power 600 homes for a year, according to Brian O'Connor, Citizens Energy's vice president of public affairs. The electricity produced will be sold to National Grid.

"That is the equivalent of taking 1,200 cars off the road each year," O'Connor said. "Compared to other projects in Massachusetts, this puts a significant dent into carbon emissions and gets us closer to a decarbonized economy."

Founded by former U.S. Congressman Joseph Kennedy II, the nonprofit Citizens Energy provides free and discounted home heating services to those in need.

"We use the successful energy ventures like this to generate revenues to finance our charitable programs," O'Connor said.

Harrington said last week his company had already installed 30 percent of the array's 17,632 solar modules as well as the 4,888 individual, precast concrete blocks that will support them.

"Six megawatts is about as substantial a parcel as you will see in Massachusetts," he said. "Generally speaking, this will be one of the biggest ones in the state when all is said and done."

Harrington added that the New England topography will make for a unique-looking solar array when the last of his construction vehicles depart.

"It is not the perfect, flat, solar array that you might see in the desert, but it gives it a little character," Harrington said. "It's been referred to as industrial origami and it is in great use on this site."

Citizens Energy project manager Emma Kosciak along with representatives of Conti and Waste Management led city officials on a site walk of the property last week. Participating in the tour were Mayor Ken Gray, state Rep. Jim Kelcourse, R-Amesbury, the city's Community and Economic Development Director William Scott, City Planner Nipun Jain, Energy Manager Thomas Barrasso, and Chief of Staff Evan Kenney.

Using a capped landfill to house a solar array is "great use of the property," said Kosciak, adding there has been an uptick in landfill solar projects the past couple years.

"As everybody knows, landfills are environmentally sensitive sites," she said. "This site was capped and closed in 1986. ... Before solar, this property would just kind of sit. It doesn't provide any value to the city, doesn't provide any value to Waste Management and we are able to put solar on it."

Kosciak said the solar project will not produce any glare and will not be visible to passers-by.

"The town's leaf dump (is close)," Kosciak said. "If you are in the leaf dump, you might see it. But the panels will be facing in (the other direction). So, they will see the back of them."

"The great thing about solar is that it is a passive technology. It just sits here. Other than the construction, once that period is over, when it is done properly, there is really no impact to the landfill itself."

Citizens Energy is leasing the property from Waste Management with the aid of a PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) program worked out with the city. The PILOT program restructures the tax payment schedule to help assure financial predictability.

"This is private property," Gray said. "So we worked together to work out a mechanism."

This is the first of two planned solar arrays in the city.

The second array — a 3.8-megawatt facility — is planned for adjacent, city-owned land on the former Titcomb Pit.

That array will benefit the city directly, Gray said.

"Because it is on city property, Titcomb will provide about two-thirds of the city's power requirements directly," Gray said. "So we measure that more in the cost savings and we expect to save roughly \$250,000 a year because we are going to be getting that energy directly at a very low cost. We expect to be moving forward with that very shortly."

Since Amesbury has been officially designated as a Green Community by the state's Department of Energy Resources, Barrasso said he is happy to see two solar arrays moving toward coming online.

"It is a pretty straightforward job," Barrasso said. "Every one of these we build reduces the reliance we have on petroleum-based fuels."