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NEWS

Bristol seeing significant solar investment



CONSTRUCTION OF THE 3-acre, 500-kilowatt Bristol Community Solar array is close to the halfway point and is expected to be completed around the end of this year. The

project, which consists of nearly 1,700 solar panels, occupies about a quarter of the town-owned land that used to host the Bristol municipal landfill. Photo by Richard Butz

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By Christopher Ross

BRISTOL — If the 500kW community solar project under construction on 3 acres of Bristol's former town landfill is completed, as hoped, by New Year's, the project will have gone from idea to operational in less than two years.

Bristol Community Solar, a \$1.8 million solar project undertaken by Acorn Energy Solar (AES), a partnership between the Acorn Energy Co-op of Addison County and Aegis Renewable Energy of Waitsfield, calls for nearly 1,700 solar panels producing 440 watts apiece.

Construction began about a month ago, and significant progress has already been made on the site, including infrastructure to support the panels and all of the poles, wires and transformers, according to the AES update presented to the Bristol selectboard on Oct. 22, which described the project as about 35% complete.

This is the third solar project undertaken by the Acorn Energy Co-op — the others were in Shoreham and Middlebury — and its second in partnership with Aegis Renewable Energy.

"Acorn is amazing and dedicated and put a lot of work and time into this project," said Sally Burrell, chair of the Bristol Energy Committee, which pitched the project to Acorn in early 2020.

According to the Acorn website, "what distinguishes this project from most other solar development in the state, is that it's entirely local in its legal, financial and ownership structure. It's designed by Vermonters, for Vermonters and ... will ultimately be owned by the local investors who are project participants (individuals, local businesses, churches, and other organizations), and who will benefit from the project's energy production.

"Those investors will receive monthly credits on their Green Mountain Power bills in proportion to their project ownership. This will allow these local investors to play an active part in Vermont's renewable energy future, and will also provide them with a reliable and

stably priced local source of electricity in uncertain times. It also demonstrates how projects like these can be successfully developed with the active partnership among Acorn Energy Co-op, town governments, and local residents and businesses.”



BCS investors include the town of Middlebury, which committed \$323,000 to the project, in exchange for being guaranteed at least 15% of its panels. The investment could save Middlebury up to \$180,000 in energy costs over the life of the bond, which was approved by town voters this summer.

Bristol will also benefit financially from BCS, receiving an \$11,000 annual lease payment for the landfill space, Burrell said.

BRISTOL SOUTH

Bristol Community Solar follows fast on the heels of “Bristol South GLC Solar,” a 150kW array built in 2020 on private land off Route 116, just south of Notch Road.

Waterbury’s Green Lantern Solar built that project, Burrell explained, and the town of Bristol benefits from that project as well, this time through net metering credits.

Net metering, as explained by Green Mountain Power (GMP) on its website, “is how Vermonters can generate their own electricity and send what they don’t use back onto the grid. If a net metered customer uses more electricity than is generated, the customer will pay the utility only for the difference. If the system generates more electricity than the customer used in a month, Green Mountain Power records a credit towards the customer’s next bill.”

Because of its modest size — it sits on less an an acre — Bristol South GLC Solar qualifies for the net metering program.

According to its agreement with Green Lantern and GMP, the town of Bristol receives credits primarily through four town meters — at the Firehouse, Holley Hall, the Town Garage and the Pump House, Burrell said. This allows the town to reduce its electricity bills by roughly \$4,000 a year.

GREEN PEAK

A third major solar project in Bristol has just received its Certificate of Public Good (CPG) from the Vermont Public Utility Commission.

The 2.2-megawatt project, developed by Green Peak Solar, will be located just off Cain Hill Road, on a site that had once been considered for a gravel pit.

Green Peak has purchased the land and plans to sell energy to the entire grid, Burrell said.

Like the BCS landfill solar project, the gravel pit solar project will feature bi-facial panels that can absorb and convert light that's reflected off of snow on the ground. In addition, this array will use moveable panels that will track the sun across the sky.

A separate phase of the project calls for battery storage onsite, which can be made available to utilities during peak times, Burrell said.

Green Peak Solar was co-founded by Middlebury College alums Chris Cadwell, who began his solar career in San Francisco, and Nathaniel Vandal, who began his career in Seattle.

They describe themselves as "a small team of renewable energy developers with over 20 years of combined experience," according to the company website. "We are passionate about the environment and continue to innovate ways to solve the climate crisis."



BRISTOL COMMUNITY SOLAR is the third solar project undertaken by the Acorn Energy Co-op and at 500 kilowatts by far the biggest. Its previous projects, in Shoreham and Middlebury were 150 kilowatts. Investors in the \$1.8 million project, being constructed on the former Bristol landfill, include the town of Middlebury.

MOUNT ABE NEXT?

After Green Peak's project, the next major solar project undertaken in Bristol could be at Mount Abraham Union High School.

Recent public comments by Mount Abraham Unified School District officials indicate there is strong interest in incorporating solar panels when it comes time to replace the high school roof.

According to MAUSD Facilities Director Joel FitzGerald, the Mount Abe roof has three years left from its life expectancy and "we are certainly looking at installing panels when the roof is replaced at that time."

The MAUSD has already dipped its toe into solar stream, so to speak, having partnered

with AllEarth Renewables to install a 100kW array in a field adjacent to the school.

Ultimately, FitzGerald said, the MAUSD would like to have solar panels on every roof in the district.

ENERGY PLAN

These are exciting times for Bristol and its Energy Committee, Burrell said.

The town's Enhanced Energy Plan, which is currently being reviewed by the Addison County Regional Planning Commission, lays out a path toward helping Vermont reach its energy goals, including "90×50" — obtaining 90% of the state's energy through renewable sources by 2050.

As the plan notes, Bristol isn't the number-one sunniest place on earth, but it's not too shabby, either.

"Bristol's location and climate mean our share of solar energy is less than average," the plan says. "Nevertheless, the rate of solar energy input to Bristol ranges from about 500 kilowatts per acre in January to 900 kilowatts per acre in June."

Based on the town's current electrical energy consumption, that should be plenty.

"Even in January Bristol could, in principle, meet its average energy demand with solar energy (18.4 MW), using just 150 acres," the plan explains. "Inefficiencies could raise this figure many times over, as would increased energy consumption in January. Nevertheless, it's clear that the solar resource at Bristol is theoretically more than adequate for their energy needs."

Generating energy locally also has the added benefit of keeping money in the state, Burrell said.

Plus, "the more renewable energy we create, the more self-reliant we are. Which is why we're grateful we've been able to find good locations for all of these projects."

For more information about Bristol's Enhanced Energy Plan, visit tinyurl.com/BristolEEP.

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