

ACTIONABLE RENEWABLE ENERGY DATA & INTEL

NPM
NEW PROJECT MEDIA

Southampton builds on first-mover status with Long Island's first community solar RFP

By Elana Knopp

The Town of Southampton, New York, is building on its first-mover status with the release of an RFP for the first community distributed generation (CDG) solar project on Long Island, an opportunity made available through its community choice aggregation (CCA) program.

The project will be built on the North Sea municipal landfill, owned and operated by the Town of Southampton.

Southampton was the first municipality on Long Island in the LIPA (Long Island Power Authority) service area to launch a CCA program, with Brookhaven, Hempstead, East Hampton, and the Village of Southampton following suit. The program enables the town's plan to secure electricity from 100 percent renewable sources at the same or lower price than is being offered by the electric utility. Operational in more than 50 municipalities outside of the LIPA service area, CCA is a New York State program authorized by the Public Service Commission (PSC).

NPM



In 2018, the PSC approved CDG as part of Southampton's CCA program, administered by Joule Community Power. Approved by LIPA in 2020, CDG allows for the construction of new, local, renewable generation of electricity and offers multiple benefits to the municipality, including annual lease payments for the project site, bill credits generated by the project that are passed on to residents, and investment in future sustainability efforts.

Southampton Councilman John Bouvier believes the initiative can help the municipality make demonstrable progress towards meeting its climate goals while benefiting residents--one project at a time.

"We have other areas like this, unusable land and landfills that are proximate to the grid in ways that we can connect to it and provide that power and also get energy credits for our residents on their bills," Bouvier told NPM. "We can also take advantage of the lease payments that we would get from leasing the land to a solar developer and put that into sustainable goals, so it feels like a win-win all around for a whole bunch of reasons."

Southampton's CDG program is funded by a USD 18 cents per kW/h rate as a VDER (value of distributed energy resource), which is paid by LIPA.

"We get properties remediated to prepare them for solar arrays on places that are sealed landfills like we did in this RFP for North Sea," Bouvier said. "It's a landfill that's been sealed. You cannot plant trees on it, you cannot do much with it, so this seemed like a really good way to provide power and meet our energy goals. Southampton has energy goals to try and be energy dependent by 2025 and carbon neutral by 2040, so CCAs are doing that by helping us leapfrog to that goal. The challenges are that we have to develop solar codes, but those are good challenges."



Mitigating risks

When it comes to climate, there is a lot at stake for Southampton. Located in the southeastern portion of Suffolk County and situated partly on the South Fork of Long Island, the coastal hamlet of 60,000 year-round residents faces considerable risk from rising sea levels, flooding and shoreline erosion. By 2045, the three counties that make up most of Long Island—Suffolk, Nassau and Queens--could encompass nearly 15,000 homes at risk of chronic flooding, according to a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists.

“We’re dealing with all kinds of things with climate change, and we’re a coastal community as well,” Bouvier said. “This just seems a natural thing to do to prove by example that we’re able to generate more power. We can help our residents out, we are able to do some good environmental things by remediating properties. Fortunately, we have identified several properties in Southampton to do that. We’re calling that our pipeline, so we’ll see how this RFP goes.”



Lynn Arthur, who serves as Energy Chair of Southampton's Sustainability Committee, said the municipality has made significant strides to help meet its climate goals, with several more major clean energy initiatives in the works.

“At the end of the day, if we put a solar array on a school or parking lot or anywhere, that solar array is going to generate revenue for that school or entity,” Arthur told NPM. “It's going to reduce the tax levy, and it's going to benefit the taxpayers. So, the residents, if it is communicated to them, know why it is being done and how they are being benefited by paying less taxes. I think that will help, and the naysayers will not come out of the woodwork like they would ordinarily.”



The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) has been leading the charge to develop solar projects on underutilized properties like landfills and brownfields. The agency's NY-Sun Megawatt Block Program provides financial incentives for developing solar projects on underutilized sites, and in 2018 ramped up incentives for projects on landfills and brownfields as part of its soft, indirect cost reduction effort.

“In some communities, there are arguments against solar, like you have to tear down trees and ruin land in order to put arrays on,” Bouvier said. “That's not really the case. Most municipalities have landfills or brownfield sites. I think this will change that attitude that some people have that solar arrays are destructive environmentally. This is a great way to remediate these properties at the expense of the developer who is getting income from the system, but also to reinvest some money that we get. It is sort of a self-sustaining goal. I think once you start looking at this in depth, you realize that this can work.”

Bouvier said the solicitation has already received more than 40 project proposals.

“It's been overwhelming actually--good overwhelming,” he said. “This is a great group effort and I think that's really what it takes. It takes a municipality and people who are excited to drive forward these goals. It is great to have these levels of government that are all working together and working toward the same goal. A lot of good has happened because of all this work. I am excited. It's a bright future in Southampton.”

Project proposals are due Thursday, 27 May 2021, by 2:00 pm.