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TOP STORY

# Hinsdale solar project moving ahead, slated to be largest in state



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HINSDALE — The largest solar project in the state may be headed for Hinsdale.


Selectmen on Monday approved a payment in lieu of taxes, or PILOT, for the \$50 million project that’s tentatively scheduled to be completed by the end of 2019.

Among other points, the firm proposing it claims the project would create 185 jobs while being constructed and three to six once complete, offset more than 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions over 20 years — and that it’s a good deal for both the company and Hinsdale.


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Ranger Solar, the Yarmouth, Maine-based company developing the Chariot

Solar Project, would pay the town at least \$500,000 per year for 20 years in lieu of local property taxes, according to Danielle Changala, the company's general counsel. After that, the property would be subject to local taxes, she said.

The proposed site covers a roughly 400-acre swath between Brattleboro and Monument roads, and is on private land that the company intends to either lease or buy, Changala said. The solar panels, which would be about 12 feet off the ground, wouldn't cover the entire area, she said.

The solar project would generate up to 65 megawatts, which could power between 13,000 and 19,500 average homes, according to Aaron Svedlow, Ranger's vice president of permitting. He said power generated by the solar array would go to the New England grid.

Hinsdale would take the title of largest solar array in the state from Peterborough, which has a 944-kilowatt operation (1,000 kilowatts equals 1 megawatt).

Svedlow said Ranger was attracted to Hinsdale because of existing electrical infrastructure in town that hasn't been fully used since the nearby Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant in Vernon, Vt., was shut down in 2014. He likened Vermont Yankee to a heart, and the connection between Hinsdale and Vernon to a "main vein."

Changala said the PILOT program is good for Ranger Solar by stabilizing the company's local tax burden. If the project goes through, the company will also pay separate state taxes, she said Monday.


Selectmen also seemed to like the proposal and PILOT plan; they voted unanimously to approve it with the exception of Vice Chairman Steve Diorio, who abstained, citing "personal conflicts" he declined to explain further.

Chairman Wayne Gallagher said, among other points, that the solar array would bring land out of "current use," thus adding it to Hinsdale's tax base. Current use typically means local tax discounts for qualifying landowners who wish not to develop land but rather preserve it as open space. The solar project is on land primarily zoned industrial, according to Gallagher.

In a Monday letter to the N.H. Site Evaluation Committee (SEC), Gallagher elaborated on his support for the project.

Among many points, he said the PILOT agreement would be a substantial economic benefit to taxpayers, the array would not be overly visible and is designed with attention to natural resource preservation, the project would reduce regional dependence on fossil fuels, and that Ranger Solar has communicated with the local public in a transparent way beyond any legal

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requirements.

Residents who attended Monday's meeting were also enthusiastic. John Boden, who said he has solar panels on his home, which is near the proposed project, was all for it.



"I'm glad to see something getting into the town to help (increase) the tax base," he said.

Changala said the company's next step is to begin the approval process with the N.H. SEC. The state agency needs to approve the location, scope and design of the solar array for the project to go forward, and that process can take about 15 months, she said.

Meanwhile, Ranger is also working on a \$30 million solar project in Fitzwilliam. In May, the company's plans for that project called for a 60- to 80-megawatt array, but it's since been scaled back to an up-to-30-megawatt array, Changala said.

Adam Cohen, president of Ranger Solar, said that's because while inspecting the proposed site, the company realized parts of it are wetlands, which weren't mapped, and are unfit for construction. The Fitzwilliam site would also be on private land that the company intends to either lease or buy, Changala said.

Cohen added that while the Hinsdale project is "a little bit ahead" of the Fitzwilliam project in terms of permitting, both are tentatively scheduled to be constructed by the end of 2019.

"I've been doing it 10 years," Cohen said of solar projects, and "they kind of take on a life of their own, as you get the land lease ... then as you do the wetland work, out in the field, you meet with the community, you (get) feedback ... we generally take (our) own timeline to make sure they're right."

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Isaac Stein can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1435, or [Istein@keenensentinel.com](mailto:Istein@keenensentinel.com). Follow him on Twitter @ISteinKS