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As solar power rises, WMECO proposes UMass site

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Wednesday, March 4, 2009

AMHERST - The University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center is among eight potential host sites for a large-scale solar energy program.

The $42 million venture, proposed by the Western Massachusetts Electric Co., would propel the utility into solar energy. Approvals are still needed.

WMECO's average residential customer, who uses 500 kilowatt hours per month, would pay for the project, the company says. But that cost would come to "significantly less than one dollar per month," said spokeswoman Sandra Ahearn.

The utility hopes to receive federal and other outside funding to reduce expenses, added Ahearn.

The plan, filed on Feb. 12, is awaiting approval from the state's Department of Public Utilities; WMECO expects to hear back in about six months.

The solar program, which could be completed as early as 2010, is designed to explore the up-and-coming solar technology and help the state answer key questions about how to increase solar operations to serve larger populations.

Peter Clarke, the utility's president and chief operating officer, said WMECO aims to create a venture that can be a model for utility-owned solar power generation.

"The knowledge gained from the program also can be applied to other distributed renewable technologies, including wind and biomass, which are equally important to the state's goals for energy independence and energy security," he said in a statement. Last week the state released a report called Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Potential at State Owned Properties, which names potential sites across the commonwealth for such ventures.

The company chose its possible sites by focusing on cost-effective locations like landfills and public buildings, including the roof of the university's Fine Arts Center, Ahearn said.

UMass would be compensated with lease payments or discounted electricity for allowing WMECO to use any of the university's property, said Loren Walker, manager of the Advanced Research Initiative at UMass.

WMECO would be responsible for purchasing, installing and maintaining the project's equipment.

University Chancellor Robert Holub signed a letter of interest, but more discussions are necessary before a decision to participate in the solar program is finalized, said Walker.

"We have a commitment to clean energy and reducing the university's footprint," he said. "It's an exciting opportunity, but it's still very preliminary right now."

Other rooftops, a field to the west of the football stadium and several parking lots have also been discussed as possible sites at UMass.

The eight initial sites would produce 6 megawatts of solar capacity, which would increase to 15 megawatts, or enough electricity to power 15,000 homes, through additional locations built by the end of 2012.

Beyond 2012, the number of sites could expand to produce 50 megawatts.

Besides UMass, potential sites listed are the city of Pittsfield's landfill, Springfield Central High School, a former General Electric site now owned by the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, and two

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a former General Electric site now owned by the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, and two utility-owned properties - one on Silver Lake Road in Pittsfield and the other at 300 Cadwell Drive in Springfield.

The company said it has also received interest from Solutia Inc. in Springfield, the Big E and The Republican of Springfield.

Under the Green Communities Act passed in 2008, electric distribution companies like WMECO are authorized to participate in the state's solar energy development goal of 250 megawatts of installed solar by 2017. The legislation allows WMECO to own solar facilities that produce up to 50 megawatts.

WMECO is part of the Northeast Utilities System, which serves about 200,000 customers in 59 communities throughout western Massachusetts.

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