E.P. planning solar farm at former landfill site

BY CHRIS BARRETT
BARRETT@PBN.COM

Let's talk dirt and trash. Not the political kind, but the kind that will serve as the foundation for an East Providence solar farm that could start construction as soon as this year.

The city is progressing with plans to cover a former landfill with dirt – much of it from under the old Interstate 195 in Providence – and build arrays of solar panels that could power all of East Providence's municipal buildings and schools.

Trucks from a **R.I. Department of Transportation** contractor started rolling on to the Forbes Street site in December, dumping load after load of dirt. All told, the DOT expects to deliver free of charge 50,000 cubic yards of dirt it values at $225,000. Trucks had already delivered about 22,000 cubic yards by the end of January, DOT spokeswoman Dana Alexander Nolfe said.

As the trucks unload their cargo and city workers spread the dirt, engineers and planners elsewhere are undertaking a feasibility study for the project. Director of Planning Jeanne Boyle said that the city expects to move forward with the project and the study is primarily aimed at addressing the details.

City personnel and consultants from CME Energy and OCI Solar Power have been on the job since the fall, when the City Council unanimously agreed to work out a memorandum of understanding. In December, the project received an additional boost when the Rhode Island Foundation awarded a $40,000 grant for engineering studies.

If the project happens, it would be the first active use of the 229-acre property since the landfill closed in 1979 after a decade as the city's dump.

Preliminary plans call for CME Energy and OCI Solar Power to develop and operate the farm. The farm would provide some or all the electricity to the city, which would retain ownership of the land. Boyle said the city hopes it could buy electricity from the farm at a cheaper rate than from other utilities. And it may be able to sell excess electricity back to the electric grid and collect revenue. There are also talks about incorporating the farm as a real-life tool in the school department's curriculum.

The farm, were it to open, would become one of the largest in New England and put East Providence squarely on the map for renewable energy projects, Boyle said.

"To be at the forefront of creating renewable energy in New England certainly is a point of pride," Boyle said.

Construction on the farm could start later this year, said Nick Bullinger, chief operating officer at OCI Solar Power. The project is expected to include about 1,000 panels and occupy about 60 acres.

Bullinger said the project would likely cost between $20 million and $50 million. The money would come entirely from private sources, the city and Bullinger say.

The cost, Bullinger said, would have been much higher if not for the project's location. The former landfill sits close to where electricity is needed. That avoids the need to install pricey, high-powered transmission lines to carry the electricity to urban metropolises. Instead, it's expected the 10-megawatt farm will plug directly into nearby distribution lines.

Solar panels could power all of East Providence's municipal buildings and schools.

Workers would build the farm in phases. As one section of the landfill is covered with dirt – "capped" in industry speak – solar panels would move in and so on. The whole process would take about two years.

It's a project city officials likely never imagined when East Providence acquired the land in 1965 to mitigate local drainage issues and floated plans to build a golf course. The golf course never happened and – after the landfill closed – other plans came and went.

At one point, the city considered building recreational facilities but abandoned the idea because of the cost of preparing the polluted land. The city also threw out an idea to build a recreational center. Proposals from developers to build condominiums and an assisted living facility fizzled out as well.

When the city started updating its comprehensive plan in the late 2000s, officials looked once again at the Forbes Street landfill. With encouragement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and **R.I. Department of Environmental Management**, the City Council positioned the site as a home to a renewable energy project with a vote in January 2010.

When the city put out a request six months later, it received seven proposals, including companies pitching wind turbines as well as biofuel and hydrogen-powered plants.

"We had some very interesting proposals," Boyle said.

The city eventually settled on solar, deeming it the most practical. And since then the dirt-and-trash talk has continued, and is likely to for some time.