



## Rhode Island news

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# Plans for East Providence solar facility get boost

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PROVIDENCE — Plans in East Providence to build the state's largest solar-power facility atop a former landfill received a boost Monday when the state Economic Development Corporation awarded the project a \$200,310 grant.

The 10-megawatt proposal would dwarf the 142-kilowatt solar array that sits on the roof of United Natural Foods' headquarters in Providence, currently the biggest of its kind in the state.

The grant from the state Renewable Energy Fund was approved unanimously by the EDC's board of directors and would fund a feasibility study for the project. EDC board member David M. Dooley said the study could resolve issues raised by other communities that are considering utility-scale solar farms in the region.

"The efficacy of large-scale solar in the Northeast quadrant of the U.S. has been a significant question for a long time," said Dooley, president of the University of Rhode Island.

Although large solar farms have been built elsewhere in the country, particularly the Southwest, they are not common in New England. In Rhode Island, smaller has been the rule; however, bigger projects are being explored. Toray Plastics is planning a 375-kilowatt system. And the Washington County Regional Planning Council is developing a 2-megawatt facility on Westerly's landfill.

Still, the East Providence proposal would easily exceed those projects in size. The city has partnered with CME Energy, of Boston, to build the solar farm in phases at the 227-acre Forbes Street landfill, which hasn't been in use for decades.

A facility of up to 5 megawatts would be built first, with plans to expand it to up to 10 megawatts or more. The first phase would provide power to Riverside Middle School and the city's sewage-treatment plant, which, alone, uses 2 megawatts of electricity annually.

The total cost for full build-out could be up to \$50 million. The city could offset that by selling electricity to the power grid and has talked with Barrington and Providence about providing power to them.

Keith Stokes, executive director of the EDC, called the proposal innovative in that it would be sited on an out-of-use landfill.

Bill Martin, president of CME Energy, said, "It's an opportunity to turn fallow land into something productive."

The grant from the EDC would be paid back if the project is developed successfully. The Rhode Island Foundation is also contributing money and the state Office of Energy Resources has committed \$100,000 in stimulus funds.

The EDC board gave funding to one other renewable-energy project, this one on a much smaller scale.

Safeway Auto Services, an auto-repair company in Bristol, was given \$125,000 to build a 50-kilowatt wind turbine at its property. The \$250,000 turbine, which would provide 70 percent of the company's electricity, has been approved by the town.

Half of the funding will be given as a grant and the other half as a low-interest loan. Safeway will have 10 years to pay off the loan, which has a 2-percent interest rate.

Although they applauded the project, some EDC board members raised questions about awarding a large sum to a relatively small project. They asked if the money was being leveraged wisely. However, they voted unanimously to award the funds.

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