

Middlesex County wants to use solar panels to power county jail, public works garage

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By [Tom Haydon/The Star-Ledger](#)

NORTH BRUNSWICK — Middlesex County wants to install solar panels over 80 acres near the county jail and public works garage — a project that would generate the electricity to power those operations.

CME Associates, a Sayreville engineering consulting firm, projected the county could cut energy costs by several hundred thousand dollars annually with solar panels at the county facility on Route 130 at Apple Orchard Lane in North Brunswick.

Panels could cover half of the 160 acres of available space at the county complex, said CME's David Samuel. The panels would not be installed on land along Route 130 where recreation fields now exist.

The panels could produce enough energy to cover nearly all the power needed for the jail, the youth detention center, a sheriff's substation, the county central vehicle garage, road department, highway and buildings offices and archives and records office.

"Implementation of this initiative will provide 90 percent of our energy requirement there and save us over \$14 million" over a 15-year period, Freeholder Charles Tomaro said.

In early April, the county awarded Vanguard Energy Partners, based in Branchburg, a contract to install solar panels at Middlesex County College in Edison. Vanguard will put panels on five roofs, and over two parking lots, said attorney John Hoffman of the Woodbridge firm of Wilentz Goldman and Spitzer, who handled the contract for the county.

Using solar panels will cut the college's energy costs from the current 26 cents per kilowatt hour to 2.6 cents per kilowatt hour, Hoffman said. The rooftop panels will be installed this year and the panels over the parking lots will be constructed next year, Hoffman said.

The county freeholder board last week hired the Wilentz law firm as a consultant for the contract at the Apple Orchard Lane project at a fee of \$120,000. Freeholders also hired CME Associates as a consultant for \$643,000.

County officials outlined a speedy plan for seeking bids and selecting a contractor that can apply for federal construction grants.

Freeholder H. James Polos urged the freeholders to broaden the project, asking leaders of towns across the county if they wanted to join and have solar panels built on municipal and school buildings and property.

"With the buying power we can have, others can have these low rates," Polos said.

Freeholder Director Christopher Rafano countered that the Apple Orchard Lane Project is "time sensitive" because of specific timelines for the federal funds.

Hoffman said studies would be needed for other properties, and there was no certainty that the same low rates would be available.

Installing solar panels is on part of the county master plan, which includes efforts to conserve and reduce energy use, Tomaro said.