

Solar plan called savings

Installation free to taxpayers

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Written by

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MIDDLESEX COUNTY — A proposed project to cover portions of Middlesex County's 160-acre complex in North Brunswick with solar panels could save the county and — taxpayers — millions of dollars because the project would nearly wipe out the cost to power the six buildings, including the county jail, officials say.

Taxpayers also wouldn't be on the hook to install the panels. Under the terms of a state Power Purchase Agreement, a developer would bear all the cost — estimated about \$42 million — of purchasing the panels and installing and maintaining them for 15 years.

The developer would profit by taking advantage of a federal subsidy that would cover 30 percent of the project's cost and by selling lucrative clean-energy credits to companies the state requires to purchase or to produce clean energy. The company then would sell the electricity harvested by the panels to the county at a below-market rate.

The county is estimated to spend \$16.3 million on electricity in the next 15 years. With the panels, the county could save as much as \$14 million.

The proposal is similar to the agreement Middlesex County College has with Vanguard Energy Partners of Branchburg to install panels on five buildings by the end of the summer and over two parking lots next year.

The college will save \$12.9 million, or about half its energy cost, over the 15-year agreement, said John Hoffman of the Woodbridge law firm Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer, which is overseeing the project.

After 15 years, the school and the county would have the option of buying the panels from the developers at fair market value, or remove them, Hoffman said. Panels being installed by other government agencies have a supposed life span of 30 years.

The county is seeking proposals for the Apple Orchard Lane project. The county hired CME Associates of Sayreville to provide a feasibility study and design plans for Apple Orchard Lane for \$298,000 and to provide construction management for \$345,000.

The county gave a \$120,000 contract to Wilentz to handle legal work. Wilentz also will collect \$95,000 for the MCC project. CME and Wilentz will be paid with proceeds received from the solar developer, officials said.

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