

Mt. Laurel MUA plans to go solar

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by Rose Krebs

The Central Record staff

MOUNT LAUREL—The township Municipal Utilities Authority (MUA) is expected to award a contract tonight to a contractor to install solar panels at an 11-acre property in Ramblewood that has a drinking well and wastewater pumping station.

The well and pumping station is located in an area of Ramblewood known as Pennybridge and there are two buildings on site — a storage area and shed for the well. Wastewater from the pump there is sent to the new wastewater treatment facility on Elbo Lane.

There used to be a drinking water plant on site, but that building was demolished in 2006. The drinking well and wastewater pump at the Pennybridge site both service about 20 percent of the township's use.

Electricity used on site is costly — about \$90,000 annually, said MUA executive director Pam Carolan. The MUA's total annual electricity costs is \$1.2 million and Carolan said the authority is trying to reduce those expenses with green projects.

When federal stimulus funds became available, the MUA decided to focus on a project to convert to solar panel use at the site, Carolan said. The measure would achieve dual goals of being more cost effective and environmentally sound, she added.

“We're trying to do things that will show people how to conserve energy,” Carolan said.

Last year, the MUA began looking at the possibility of installing solar panels at the site and got in an application for stimulus funds soon after funds were made available.

Plans are to install 1,680 2-foot by 4-foot ground-mounted solar panels on 1.5 acres of the site. The panels will be about three to six feet off the ground and will be placed in 30 rows. At this point, Carolan pointed out, plans are preliminary with final design to occur once a company is hired for the installation. The panels will be angled toward the southern sky.

The amount of panels to be installed was determined by the electric use at the site.

Alaimo Group engineers and Rowan University were consulted for preliminary design.

The project is a “design build,” meaning the contractor hired will set final specifications and design.

The township zoning board has approved the project, as has the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Carolan said.

The cost of the project is \$5.3 million and the MUA will take out a low-interest state loan, through the Environmental Infrastructure Loan Program, to cover costs up front. Federal government stimulus funds will reimburse 50 percent of the expense.

The federal funds are termed “principal forgiveness,” which Carolan explained is essentially a grant.

A savings will be realized on two fronts — the \$90,000 annual electricity costs will be eliminated and the MUA will be eligible to receive Solar Renewable Energy Credits that they can sell on the market.

Under the state Board of Public Utilities’ Solar Renewable Energy Credit Registration program, which is new this year, townships are eligible for solar credits that can be sold to create revenue.

“They’ll (the solar credits) make is more than the debt service (will cost),” Carolan said.

When the numbers were crunched, it was determined that the MUA should make about \$270,000 annually from the credits, and when the electricity savings and debt service costs are figured in, the savings per year should be about \$160,000.

Carolan said the panels come with a 20- to 25-year guarantee and that the MUA is looking at the possibility of putting panels at other sites. However, there are not many other suitable buildings where they could be installed, she added.

After discussions with residents who live near the Pennybridge site, the MUA has agreed to install a fence and add landscaping to shield view of the panels, Carolan said.

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