

Amherst Eyes Solar Power Boost

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By *smerszbach*

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AMHERST - Solar panels that would supply all the municipal and school electricity needs in Amherst, and save the town \$25 million in energy costs over the next three decades, could be constructed in the next year.

Town Manager John Musante announced to the Select Board Monday that he has decided to enter into negotiations with BlueWave Capital of Boston to install a 4.75-megawatt photovoltaic array at the old landfill on Belchertown Road that, when complete, would put Amherst at the forefront of renewable energy projects in the state.

Estimates from BlueWave show that the town could reduce its carbon output by 6,000 tons per year, which is the equivalent of removing 1,200 vehicles from the roads.

But Musante said the proposal, one of six reviewed by a committee led by Department of Public Works Superintendent Guilford Mooring, will be more than a symbolic green initiative.

"This is Amherst leapfrogging to be a leader in the region," Musante said.

The project would be large enough to handle the electricity needs at all school and town buildings, including the water and wastewater treatment plants. It would also generate significant property taxes for upgrades to the old landfill on the south side of Belchertown Road.

Musante said negotiations with BlueWave will commence soon and could take several weeks. It is unclear what the timetable would be for installation. There are still many hurdles, including connecting to the Western Massachusetts Electric Co. grid, getting a state Department of Environmental Protection permit for what is considered a brownfield site, along with local permits. Town Meeting is also expected to be asked to authorize Musante entering a long-term contract with BlueWave this spring.

Solar projects like this one are becoming more common in Massachusetts as a state program allows private companies to earn and sell energy credits.

In Easthampton, a contract was signed last year with Borrego Solar Systems Inc. of Lowell on a 2.7-megawatt photovoltaic system that would bring an estimated \$100,000 in annual savings. Borrego is covering the \$20 million cost of putting up the arrays.