

Town interested in abandoned airport solar project

By Matt Turer

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The town is looking to pick up where the airport recently left off in pursuing the installation of a solar-energy facility on airport property. The Nantucket Energy Office plans to continue investigating ways

to move ahead with the project, which would be located on a 10- to 25-acre parcel of airport property near the intersection of Bunker and Maddequecham Valley roads. The proposed solar-energy facility was part of a broader initiative at the airport endorsed by former Massachu-

setts Gov. Deval Patrick in 2013 which would have made it the first carbon-neutral airport in the state.

The solar project was abandoned in August, however, due to financial uncertainty by the airport administration and Honeywell, the technology and engi-

neering company awarded the contract to design and build it.

“We’re trying to pick up where Honeywell left off,” Nantucket energy coordinator Lauren Sinatra said. “(Honeywell) did a lot of good work, but in the end they pro-

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vided a final product that wasn't in alignment with what the airport and the town assumed the agreement was."

Honeywell originally represented that it would guarantee revenue for the solar facility, and if that revenue wasn't initially achieved, it would cover the losses until the project reached financial stability, Nantucket Memorial Airport environmental coordinator Noah Karberg said.

Honeywell rescinded that promise as more information concerning the logistics of the project, the environmental permitting cost and borrowing costs were developed.

"They didn't have a profit margin to fall back on," Sinatra said. "They wanted to have their name associated with the first carbon-neutral airport in the country. We all did. But it wouldn't have been in the town's or the airport's best interest."

Now, Sinatra has begun work with renewable-energy company SunEdison and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in an effort to analyze ways in which continued pursuit of the solar aspect of the initiative can benefit the island.

"Analysis showed that Nantucket should find a third party to operate the facility rather than run the facility ourselves, which is what Honeywell proposed we do," Sinatra said. "(We) found the price of electricity from a third-party provider would be below current electric rates

for the town."

The current solar-facility model that Sinatra is looking at would create two megawatts of electricity and be part of what is called a "community share model."

Under this model, the town would purchase up to 50 percent of the solar facility's output, leaving 50 percent, or one megawatt, available for sale to residents and small businesses on what Sinatra said would likely be a first-come-first-served basis.

According to the Solar Energies Industry Association, a national average of 164 homes can be powered by one megawatt of solar power, but that number varies by state.

Sinatra plans to present leasing agreements for the solar fields, which could also include a municipal-only field at the town's wastewater treatment plant, at the 2016 Annual Town Meeting. The "community share model" solar field would be located on airport property.

If approved, Sinatra and the town would look to have the facilities built by the end of next year, which is a key deadline for a federal investment-tax credit that would impact the facility's solar costs.

That federal tax credit reimburses 30 percent of new solar-facility costs built by municipalities before year-end 2016, but the credit drops to 10 percent on Jan. 1, 2017. "If we couldn't develop a project before the end of next year when the tax credit decreases, it would result in a 3 cent in-

crease per kilowatt hour in the price of contracted electricity (from the solar facility)," Sinatra said. "But that's not to say there wouldn't be savings before or after that deadline."

The town could net \$2 million in utility-cost savings with the proposed facilities even if the deadline passes. Sinatra is still waiting on projected construction costs from SunEdison, however, which would build the facility and produces its own solar panels in the United States. The facility's construction could hinge on those costs.

"It's still an uphill battle," Sinatra said. "But I wasn't willing to give up that easily. We have a real project here, and all it was is that Honeywell isn't a solar producer. They got into this carbon-neutral project thinking there was more work outside the solar, but they didn't realize that... we had already taken a lot of that low-hanging fruit off the tree."

According to analysis done by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the solar facility alone can't be relied on to reduce peak electricity demand on the island on a regular basis because peak solar output occurs between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m., whereas peak summer electricity demand occurs between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.

The report states, however, that a battery storage system for the solar facility could provide power as needed to reduce peak demand.

"National Grid is now dis-

cussing the concept of battery storage at their regeneration site on Bunker Road," Sinatra said. "Also, the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center is managing a \$10 million energy-storage initiative and is currently looking for a demonstration location, so there could be some incentive for us to explore this further."

Additionally, Sinatra said that National Grid – Nantucket's energy provider – feels it can defer the need for a third undersea cable, which could cost upwards of \$100 million, for another seven years just through the energy-efficiency initiatives already underway on the island, though the decision to pursue the solar facility wasn't directly connected to the third cable.

