COMMUNITY SOLAR NEAR THE BIRTHPLACE OF HYDROELECTRIC POWER
TOWN OF GRAND ISLAND IN ERIE COUNTY

Grand Island is situated in the Niagara River, which is actually a strait that flows north from Lake Erie, over Niagara Falls, and on to Lake Ontario. The NYS Thruway route to Niagara Falls from Buffalo goes through Grand Island, crossing bridges at the island’s south and north ends. The island’s population is about 20,000, and aside from clusters of suburban homes, it is mainly rural. There are two state parks on the Island—Beaver Island, a popular picnic and swimming spot for Western New Yorkers, and Buckthorn, a wildlife refuge.

PROGRAM
Blue Rock Solar proposed a solar farm on two sites, one along the Thruway and in an old vacant industrial park. Grand Island Town Board approved the two projects (currently under construction) and recently approved a third project, which is one of the largest community solar projects in New York, to be constructed by Solar Park Energy.

Thomas Guzek, managing partner of Solar Park Energy, explains that “the Federal Government Investment Tax Credit for renewable energy properties allows for a 30% tax credit ... for solar energy projects.” In addition, through NY-Sun, NYSERDA provides additional incentives which cover community solar projects and greatly assist in the ability to attract private investment capital for the remaining costs of project development.

One of the main costs of constructing a major solar project is construction and labor. Solar Park Energy has committed to hiring local union workers through the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which ensures that a substantial part of the investment stays within the region. The projected energy savings of the currently planned projects is 50-60 megawatts, according to Supervisor Nathan McMurray, which almost equals the energy consumption of Grand Island making it Net Zero fossil based energy.

PROCESS
McMurray was elected in 2015 to his first term as Grand Island Supervisor. In his campaign, he had promised to pursue renewable energy, and solar power—a year later, a solar law was crafted. The proposed law, which became a prototype for communities across the State,
was unanimously approved by the Grand Island Town Board and also received widespread support from local and state agencies, particularly NYSERDA, as well as the solar development community. The intent of the law was to give solar providers a level playing field and to instill confidence that their planned investments in this form of renewable energy could be approved.

TAKEAWAYS

Many island residents wanted to have green energy in the community, so their support was key to the projects’ approval. A lot of the groundwork to make the approvals successful was educating the public about solar power, and it was important that citizens were willing to come to meetings and speak up in support when the going got tough. Supervisor McMurray describes his strategy this way: “In my view, on this and many issues there are the saints, the sinners and the fence sitters. You can’t do much to win over the sinners so you have to involve the saints and then work on the fence sitters by giving them the facts.”

Supervisor McMurray’s advice to other municipal leaders about developing renewable energy in their communities is to “be fearless and understand you may take some hits. Do the right thing.” For Grand Island, the most important effects of the community solar installations are to give residents the opportunity to buy solar energy for their homes that will save them money on their utility bills, all while helping to hold the line on climate change.

“The town can be proud that it attaches itself to cutting edge projects such as pollinator gardens combined with solar energy,” McMurray says. “We are looking into putting a sign on the Thruway to show [the 30 million tourists who visit Niagara Falls every year] how many megawatts are being generated in real time. Everyone will see our solar arrays. What a contrast to the shut-down Huntley coal plant across the river. It will show that Grand Island is oriented to the future of energy.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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CLEAN ENERGY COMMUNITIES

Amherst, East Hampton, Red Hook  Under NYSERDA’s Clean Energy Communities program, communities that complete four out of the 10 High Impact Actions and meet all other eligibility requirements are designated by New York State as a Clean Energy Community and are eligible to apply for grants to fund additional clean energy projects. Those ten actions are:

- **Benchmarking** - Adopt a policy to report the energy use of buildings
- **Clean Energy Upgrades** - Achieve 10% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from buildings
- **LED Street Lights** - Convert street lights to energy efficient LED technology
- **Clean Fleets** - Install electric vehicle charging stations or deploy alternative fuel vehicles
- **Solarize** - Undertake a local solarize campaign to increase the number of solar rooftops
- **Unified Solar Permit** - Streamline the approvals process for solar
- **Energy Code Enforcement Training** - Train compliance officers in energy code best practices
- **Climate Smart Communities Certification** - Get certified by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- **Community Choice Aggregation** - Put energy supply choices in your community’s hands
- **Energize New York Finance** - Offer energy upgrade financing to businesses and non-profits

CLEAN ENERGY STANDARD/RPS

Eagle, East Hampton  The Clean Energy Standard requires that 50% of New York’s electricity come from renewable energy sources such as solar and wind by 2030. New renewable projects provide enormous benefits to local communities, including reduced emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, economic investment and PILOT payments, and new, high quality jobs in the clean energy sector.

COMMUNITY CHOICE AGGREGATION

Ossining  Community Choice Aggregation allows local governments to work together through a shared purchasing model to procure energy supply service and distributed energy resources for eligible customers within the jurisdictional boundaries of participating municipalities. Eligible customers will have the opportunity to have more control to lower their overall energy costs, to spur clean energy innovation and investment, to improve customer choice and value, and to protect the environment, thereby fulfilling an important public purpose.

GROUND SOURCE HEAT PUMP REBATE

Lockport  NYSERDA’s Ground Source Heat Pump Rebate provides funding for the installation of ground source heat pump systems for residences, businesses and institutions. Benefits include lower and less volatile energy bills, greater resiliency and reliability, and health benefits from this emissions-free technology.

MUNICIPAL ZERO EMISSION VEHICLE INFRASTRUCTURE REBATE PROGRAM

Amherst, DeWitt, Red Hook, Schenectady  The Municipal ZEV Infrastructure Rebate Program provides rebates to cities, towns, villages, and counties (including New York City boroughs) to install publicly available charging stations. Installation of these charging stations will help electrify New York’s transportation sector and meet its climate goals, putting local communities on the road to energy independence while helping to reduce emissions harmful to the environment.

NY-SUN

Avon, Clarkstown, Delaware, DeWitt, Grand Island, Red Hook, Schenectady  NY-Sun provides multiple resources for local governments to install solar energy, including financing, incentives, and training/education to identify opportunities and mitigate barriers, providing the tools necessary to build clean, affordable solar programs to power their communities.

REFORMING THE ENERGY VISION DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Schenectady  New York State is seeking demonstration projects to show how new products and services can capture latent value on the grid, and how new business models can monetize and distribute that value across third parties, utilities and customers. While New York’s investor-owned utilities have been directed to partner with third parties to develop a first round of REV demonstration projects, the utilities will continue to undertake demonstration projects until these kinds of products and services are fully integrated into core system operations.