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Company wants to build 18-acre solar farm on Grand Island

SolarPark Energy wants to build a \$7.5 million 18-acre solar farm on Grand Island with an option to expand to another 40 acres on undeveloped industrial property on Lang Boulevard, off of Grand Island Boulevard, according to town officials.

Deputy Supervisor James R. Sharpe told The Buffalo News that the company's proposal is to build two 9-acre farms - each with two megawatt systems - a total of four megawatts. He said the project has received approval from the town's Zoning Board. The Planning Board is also reviewing the project, but is awaiting passage of a town solar law before moving forward.

Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray, who admits he is a big fan of solar technology, said another company also expressed interest in building a solar farm in Grand Island, but it hasn't presented the town with an official proposal.

Thomas Guzek is the managing partner and CEO of SolarPark Energy LLC of Saratoga Springs. He is a former resident of Buffalo, who grew up in Kaisertown and graduated of the University at Buffalo with a degree in

electrical engineering. He said his success in other investments has allowed him to come back to the area with this type of green energy proposal.

The first investment of \$7.5 million would build the 18-acre park, with an option to further expand depending on its success, Guzek said. He said he has the capital and is ready to begin installing the panels as soon as approvals are in place. He said he is negotiations to buy the land as part of the approval process.

He said the first solar park would generate enough energy for about 800 residents in Grand Island and Western New York. Guzek said if SolarPark expands it could ultimately provide power to half of the island.

"You don't need to put panels on your home. You could actually buy the energy (through a third-party seller) coming from that solar project," said Guzek.

Guzek said in Grand Island there is very little industry since most of light manufacturing has moved out, and these vacant sites provide a great location for solar parks. He said the location SolarPark is eyeing, at Bedell Road and Lang Boulevard, is also very visible to thousands of potential customers from Interstate-190.

"We are trying to teach people what community solar is, what it looks like and how they can benefit," said Guzek.

"So many people don't understand (solar.) The technology is very simple. We are using the sun to generate power. There's no toxic element. It's quiet. It's not a safety hazard. It will have no negative impact on the environment."

He said the panels have a 30-year life and then parts can be recycled and reused.

McMurray declined to name the company behind the other smaller proposal. He said that other firms have been looking at various properties, without sewer lines, which he said would be perfect for this type of development. He said half of the properties in Grand Island do not have sewer lines.

"I want to encourage solar energy on the island. If it was up to me we would have solar on every municipal building, in all the dormant business parks and we would be the leading solar community in Western New York. That's what I want," said McMurray.

The Grand Island Town Board did not discuss Tuesday night proposed local regulations of solar farms, asking for more time to review some minor changes in the local law. The proposed law will come before the board again Feb. 6.

McMurray said developers, who want to invest in solar technology in Grand Island, asked for a local law to set the guidelines.

"They want to know what we wanted and our vision for the town (regarding solar energy facilities)," McMurray told The News prior to Tuesday's meeting.

The regulations would apply to free-standing, ground-mounted or pole-mounted solar energy collectors.

McMurray said he and Councilor Beverly Kinney wrote the law to set a standard for how to regulate solar not just for Grand Island, but for all of Western New York.

"We are uniquely suited to have solar farms. There is a giant transformer they can start feeding into and it can start going into the grid," McMurray told The News. "I can foresee a day not too far in the future where people can start driving down the Thruway and look on one side and see fields of solar panels and the other side you can see the Visitor's Center we are going to build."

Sharpe said there are actually two transformers, one on the south end and one on the north end of the island.

"It is a prime location for solar because we have the capacity in our substations and there is acreage that will accommodate them," Sharpe said.

"Think of this," said McMurray. "Imagine a sign that says, 'Welcome to Grand Island - Solar Capital of Western New York.'"

Several other Western New York municipalities, including Lackawanna and the Town of Porter, have invested in their own solar panels to reduce power costs in municipal halls.

Other Buffalo area communities are also making forays into regulating solar power as companies express interest in opening solar farms.

In the Town of Wheatfield, officials have a moratorium on ground-based solar farms while they study the issue. A hearing to revisit and perhaps loosen restrictions was set

for Jan. 23.

The Town of Lockport put restrictions on solar parks in its solar law, which was adopted in June, noting that ideas for solar projects are increasing in the town.
