

Reducing West Boylston's carbon footprint

Solar field could be operational by November

By Michael Kane BANNER EDITOR

WEST BOYLSTON — Though 100 years old this year, the West Boylston Municipal Light Plant is touting a youthful look for its age, according to recent promotional materials. And, when the sun's rays settle over West Boylston this winter, the town's carbon footprint will begin to shrink.

Light Plant General Manager H. Bradford White said he expects the Light Plant's newest green energy project, a 1,760 panel photovoltaic solar project at the base of Paul X. Tivnan Drive, to begin operating in November.

Built over eight rows, each 242 feet long, project designers were careful to take into account the topography, White said. Rather than level the field, the support poles were cut to match the ground.

"We didn't want to disturb the topography of the lot," White said. "We kept the groundwork to a minimum."

Once operating, the panels will generate more than 450,000 kilowatt hours of pollution-free electricity, or enough to power about 75 average monthly-use homes, White said.

The impetus for the solar field was environmental, White said.

"The Light Board was interested in looking at West Boylston's footprint in the environment," White said. "They wanted to lower our carbon footprint and reduce our dependency on foreign oil."

The \$2 million project could, ultimately, cost the 3,400 or so rate-payers little if anything. The Light Plant won a \$1.17 million federal Clean Renewable Energy bond to help build the field. The project could also pay for itself through the sale of solar renewable energy certificates (SERC), a state program to encourage solar development. In the program, solar projects receive tradeable credits based on the amount of energy produced.

"If the SREC market develops as anticipated by the state, the electricity generated by this project could come at no cost to West Boylston's customers," White said.

Construction of the solar field comes after the Light Plant opted away from building a wind tower at the site.

"We had information from UMass, based on information from Worcester airport, that this was probably an average site," in terms of generating wind power, White said.

Instead, West Boylston joined with 14 other communities, as well as the Massachusetts Municipal Wholesale Electric Company to develop a 10-turbine wind project on Brodie Mountain in Hancock.

Together, according to a press release from the Light Plant, the solar and wind projects will eliminate more than 585,000 tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and reduce the need for around 1.7 million barrels of oil, as compared to producing the same amount of electricity with fossil fuels.

The environmentally-sound projects serve the original mission of the Light Plant, White noted. A press release states West Boylston created a municipal light department a century ago to ensure reliable energy at a reasonable cost. Those objectives still hold true today, and the Light Plant's renewable energy strategy is to keep thinking ahead while staying true to its founding values.

"We have a great respect for the tradition, value and responsibility that comes with the public ownership and control of the town's electric utility. Part of that responsibility is finding innovative solutions to challenges posed by greener energy policies, wholesale power market reforms and increased financial risks," White said.

Though rates were not the main incentive for the project, it very likely will benefit customers in the future, White said.

"We are developing these projects on a scale that makes economic sense for our customers, so there are benefits to our current customers as well as future generations," White said.

"Green energy is not cheap, but who knows what the price for fossil fuels is going to be 10 to 15 years from now? This has a fixed cost," White said. "The project itself is paid for, and you're not paying for fossil fuel."

"The beauty of these projects is that the sun and wind are free, so the fuel cost is zero, and there is no pollution created in generating the electricity," he said.

