

Highlands East solar proposal well received

By Elizabeth Bate

Members of council and residents of Highlands East met with representatives of Abundant Solar Energy Inc. Aug. 13 to discuss new FIT proposals for the municipality.

A public meeting was held in Wilberforce at the Lloyd Watson Centre to discuss 16 new proposed sites for solar panels on municipally owned property. The meeting was attended by nine residents, four municipal councillors, and a lawyer for Highlands East helping the municipality handle the matter.

Of the proposed sites, four would be in Wilberforce, including on the roof of the hockey arena, five would be off Highway 118 between Tory Hill and Cardiff, five would be in Cardiff, one would be off McColls Road near Gooderham Lake, and the last site is proposed for Highland Grove. The sites would include a mix of ground mount and roof mount solar panels.

If the proposals are approved the municipality would lease the sites to Abundant Solar for \$5,000 each per year on a 20-year lease, with payments on the lease being made quarterly. If all 16 sites are approved it would mean \$80,000 per year in additional revenue for Highlands East.

Stephen Tunks, the Abundant renewable energy consultant speaking to residents, said the panels would be zero cost to the municipality. All the expenses including installation, maintenance and repair, and liability insurance would be covered by the company as part of the 20-year deal.

Tunks called the panels 'completely health neutral' saying they didn't give off noise or other properties that may have ill effects on residents' health.

Tunks also said the panels were produced in Canada with 95 per cent of the production happening in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Part of the deal made with the municipality is giving first right of refusal to local construction companies who may want to help build and install the projects, as well as giving maintenance and repair jobs to local contractors.

The panels are given routine maintenance check-ups three times a year, in the spring, fall and mid-summer, as well as being hooked up to a monitoring system to determine if the panels have been damaged.

The approval of the applications is based on a number of factors and requires 81 pages of documents to be submitted to the Independent Electricity System Operator, the body regulating and approving project for the government program, beginning Sept. 30.

This is the fourth round of FIT projects being considered for approval with the government looking to add more than 240 megawatts of renewable power to the grid this time around.

Tunks says applications are graded very strictly and can be eliminated for any reason if they are not technically perfect, with even a spelling error having the ability to cast doubt on an application's approval. Applications with priority points 'those supported by municipalities or for municipal projects being two of the types of priority points' will be given preference over projects without them.

Abundant will be seeking municipal support for the 16 proposed sites at the first Highlands East council meeting in September. The Highlands East proposals are just a few of the 117 proposals Abundant is submitting for Haliburton County, Tunks said. Of those 70 are proposed sites in Dysart, with 58 being on private land and 12 being suggested for municipally owned property.

Questions about the projects included those about the true nature of zero-cost, with Tunks reassuring the audience if the panels affect the cost of assessed property value and thus property taxes Abundant would pay the difference, in addition to covering all other costs, as well as concerns about safety and electricity prices.

Tunks said although electricity prices continue to climb, additional power added to the grid will only benefit the province, helping to provide more power in high-use areas like Toronto, where there is no more ability to add capacity to the grid, from areas served by the Minden transfer station, where there is capacity to add more power.

Ward 2 Councillor Suzanne Partridge thinks the panels will show an environmental commitment from Highlands East, as well as helping the local economy. 'I think it's a great opportunity for the municipality not only to generate revenue, but also for employment,' she said.

Ward 4 Councillor Joan Barton said she was pleased to see people with questions out and hoped the information presented was helpful. 'People are entitled to know what we're doing with municipal assets, and that was the point of the meeting.'