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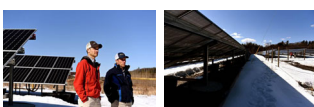
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Hartland brownfield site sees a sunny future with solar farm



During an interview, Jim Hourdequin, left, and Jack Bell of Long View Forest Inc. stand on their property where their new solar array is located in Hartland, Vt., on Tuesday, March 19, 2019. (Valley News - Jennifer Hauck) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to permission@vnews.com. Valley News photographs — Jennifer Hauck



By JOHN LIPPMAN (/byline?byline=By.JOHN.LIPPMAN.)

Valley News Business Writer

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The landscape of skeletal structures and ruined buildings near the railroad tracks between Interstate 91 and the Connecticut River in Hartland has been a wood yard of broken dreams. Over the decades, different sawmill businesses at the site have gone under — the last one, literally, up in flames.

On this 28-acre brownfield, green business shoots are sprouting again.

A Vermont forest management company has built a 745 kilowatt (direct current) solar panel array that can generate enough electricity to power 125 homes per year. The array was turned on in December.

But even though they won't draw an electron from the system — the electricity flows out into the grid — the prime beneficiaries of this \$1.6 million solar project will be Mascoma Bank and the Montshire Museum in Norwich, which are projected to save \$504,000 and \$196,000, respectively, on their utility bills from Green Mountain Power through the purchase of net metering credits in future years.

Forest management company Long View Forest, of Westminster, Vt., commissioned Burlington-based Encore Renewable Energy to build the 2,160-panel solar array sited on about 3 acres of a 28-acre remediated brownfield that had been a refuse and dumping ground decades ago.



Clean energy will be only one purpose of the site. Long View Forest plans to use the property, already zoned for industrial purposes, as the employee-owned company's new headquarters and as a hub for other businesses in the forestry industry.

“The solar project is one element. We see this becoming a ‘forestry business park’ with a goal to get other businesses to operate out of this location,” said Jack Bell, general manager of Long View Forest, adding that he is already in discussion with a forestry equipment supplier to open a facility there.

Long View bought the property in 2017 from Arthur Stout, who operated a dry kiln at the Ferry Road property that was destroyed in a 2016 fire. Stout, who grew up in Hanover, was convicted in Grafton Superior Court in 2018 for deceptive forestry business practices (<https://www.vnews.com/Man-Convicted-of-Forestry-Violations-20740578>) and given a 12-month suspended sentence.

Initially, solar power had not been on Long View Forest’s agenda, executives with the company said.

Long View Forest, which manages forest lands and runs logging crews from the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts up through the Connecticut River Valley, had been eyeing the property to build a wood-chipping plant to produce biomass chips and as a depot to store and sort logs before shipping to customers.

But as Long View Forest worked with Vermont state officials for the sign-off on the remediation, which had been completed under the previous owner but not fully documented, they learned the site’s brownfield status also made it a perfect candidate for a solar field.

Vermont regulations encourage the building of solar fields on contaminated land, such as the recently completed 7 megawatt solar project (<https://www.vnews.com/Elizabeth-Mine-Solar-Array-Sheds-Light-on-Economics-of-Electricity-12760723>) atop the Elizabeth Mine Superfund site that straddles the Thetford and Strafford town line.

Long View Forest picked Encore Renewable Energy, which already had experience building solar power stations on brownfields at multiple locations around the state, to build the Hartland system.

Then, in discussions with Mascoma Bank’s Jim Larrick, a senior vice president of commercial lending, Long View Forest learned that the bank was looking into installing its own solar panels to power its operations center on Sykes Mountain Avenue in White River Junction as well as at its various branch locations. The bank has also financed numerous residential and commercial solar power installations.

That’s when Jim Hourdequin, chief executive of Lyme Timber Co., who was also a co-founder of Long View Forest and remains a financial adviser and shareholder in the company, said he suggested that Long View could supply net metering credits associated with its Hartland array to Mascoma.

At the same time, Mascoma could supply the debt financing for the project, Hourdequin said.

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“The timing worked out really well,” Larrick said. “Mascoma was looking to invest in solar and Jim had a project far down the road in the approval process.”

Mascoma agreed to buy 100 percent of the credits from LVF Ferry Road Solar LLC, the Vermont corporation set up by Long View Forest to manage the solar power array, Hourdequin said.

The purchase of those credits essentially means that Mascoma is the sole customer of the solar array and provides the cash flow for the operation.

And because the amount of money that Mascoma pays for the net metering credits is less than that electricity would cost if purchased directly from GMP, the bank is able to lower its utility bill by hundreds of thousands of dollars over the lifetime of the contract.

Mascoma, separately, signed on to provide the debt financing, which Hourdequin said totaled about half of the solar project’s \$1.6 million cost.

The balance of the money was equity financing raised from local Upper Valley investors, according to Hourdequin, who wanted to support solar and the development of the site.

The Hartland array will generate more electricity than Mascoma needs for its net metering program, so the bank donated the remaining 30 percent of the credits to a local nonprofit. They selected the Montshire. (Mascoma Chief Executive Clay Adams also is a Montshire trustee.)

As a result, the Montshire expects to shave 25 percent annually off its GMP electricity bill.

That’s a big savings, said Marcos Stafne, executive director of the Montshire.

Stafne said the Montshire building is 30 years old and the museum has been looking to make its plant more energy-efficient — it installed a wood pellet boiler last year to heat the building. The museum weighed installing solar panels on site, but was advised by an energy auditor “that wasn’t the most advantageous thing to do.”

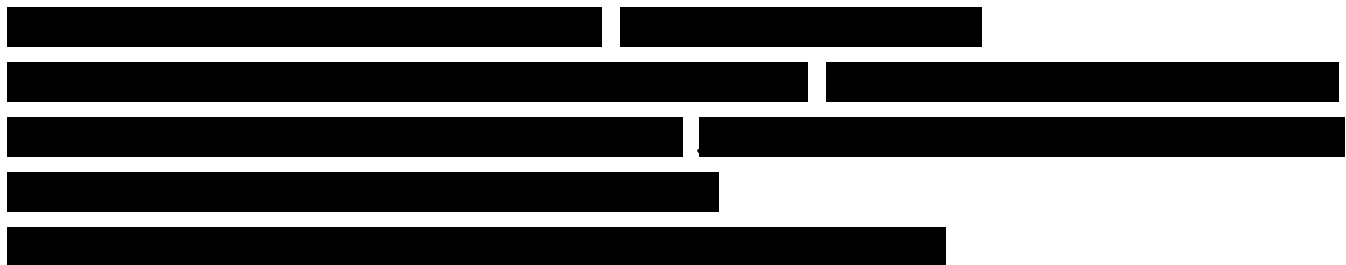
Stafne said what attracted the Montshire to Mascoma’s offer — the museum doesn’t have to pay anything for the “sub-allocated” net metering credits — is that it had to agree to the deal for only five years. Typically, such arrangements call for 25- or 30-year agreements, he said.

“This will not prohibit us should we want to produce our own solar electricity in the future,” Stafne said, noting that future solar technology may allow for a low-cost alternative.

But in the meantime, according to Hourdequin, the Montshire should lower its more than \$40,000 annual GMP electricity bill by up to \$12,000.

“That’s money that goes right back into programming and allow us to focus on what we do. ... It’s such a magnanimous gift from Mascoma,” Stafne said.

John Lippman can be reached at jlippman@vnews.com.



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