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Solar Array to Power New Life for Massachusetts Mill Building

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Fitchburg, Massachusetts [RenewableEnergyAccess.com] MassInnovation plans to construct the largest solar electric system ever installed in New England on their renovated mill complex in Fitchburg.

The 147.3 kW, \$1 million system is expected to produce some 150 MWh of electricity a year for the 350,000 sq. ft. complex and utilizes the latest in solar photovoltaic (PV) technology spread out over three different arrays.

Ansin said he hopes students will learn the impacts of burning fossil fuel and how to lessen climate change by understanding the amount of pollution avoided by using solar power.

In a move to support the solar industry of the state, MassInnovation is hiring in-state companies to do all of the work. RWE Schott Solar of Billerica will manufacture the solar electric modules for the mill system from their proprietary silicon ribbon process. A total of 500 panels will grace the historic structure, 430 panels on the roof and 70 panels on shade structures in the mill's courtyard.

Solectria of Lawrence is providing inverters for the system, and the PV system was designed by Solar Design Associates of Harvard, the same firm that recent installed a PV system and two solar thermal systems on the White House in Washington D.C. Slabich Electric of Paxton, a full-service electrical contracting firm with over 20 years experience installing solar electric systems, will take care of the system installation.

The solar project is the vision of Robert Ansin, who established MassInnovation in 1997 as a small business incubator and venture development community. The mills along the Nashua River that house the company are 125-year-old buildings that first housed a textile factory and later Anwelt Shoe, which was founded by Ansin's grandfather, Sidney Ansin.

Robert Ansin's experience in orchestrating the transformation of this historic facility into a mixed-use urban campus led to the evolution of his company as well, which is committed to improving communities by revitalizing properties through sound economic and environmental methods, and socially conscious principles.

A key component of Ansin's vision for the center is the North Central Charter Essential School. Electricity generated by the PV array would be used to power the school, and students would benefit from the solar system as a real-time teaching tool. The system will include an electronic monitoring and display system to provide real-time and historical performance data on the amount of solar power generated and the amount of greenhouse gases, heavy metals, particulates and other pollutants kept out of our environment. Ansin said he hopes students will learn the impacts of burning fossil fuel and how to lessen climate change by understanding the amount of pollution avoided by using solar power.

While the majority of the solar generating capacity will be located on the roof of the complex, the main entry will have a solar canopy as well. Several solar trellis structures have been incorporated into the central courtyard to present the technology to visitors, students, tenants and the public.

Cost-shared funding for the PV array was provided by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative and the US Department of Agriculture.

"We are grateful to the MTC and the USDA for recognizing the importance of what we are trying to do in the revitalization of old buildings into 21st century facilities and supporting our pioneering efforts," Ansin said.

In addition to the large-scale solar system, the complex will develop and operate a new \$1 million geothermal energy system to provide both heating and cooling to the facility. Ansin said he expects the geothermal system to pay for itself within seven years.

The mill complex was heated by burning coal in the past and is grandfathered under the law with an exemption to continue burning coal or any other combination of fossil fuels, according to Ansin. With the investments in new technology, the MassInnovation complex should be more environmentally friendly and energy efficient than many modern buildings. Ansin said the project should serve as a model for green renovation and new construction across the state.

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