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TOP STORY

Florham Park school board OKs solar panel agreement for all three schools

By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Managing Editor

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FLORHAM PARK - Solar panels are to grace the roofs of all three borough schools by the beginning of next school year.

The Board of Education for the grades K-8 Florham Park School District voted unanimously Monday to authorize a 15-year agreement with a solar provider to design, build, finance and maintain solar arrays atop the roofs at Briarwood Elementary School, Brooklake Elementary School and Ridgedale Middle School, all at no cost to the district.

The school district's only responsibility is to buy the solar power back from the company, HESP Solar of Montvale, at a reduced rate set by a state incentive program, helping the district to lower its energy costs while lessening its impact on the environment. The company will own and maintain the arrays while the district hosts them and uses their electricity at a discount.

"Basically this project will make our schools not only green, but it will also save the district money," board member Fabienne Crimi said at the meeting.

The board voted to award the Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) to HESP Solar above three other bidders at the recommendation of a bid evaluation team consisting of district officials and professionals as well as officials from energy consulting firm Gabel Associates of Highland Park.

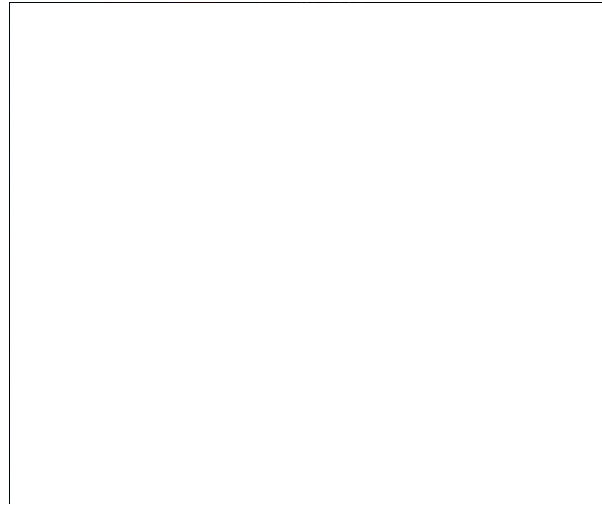
The board had previously voted in August to hire Gabel to solicit bids from solar vendors through a Request for Proposals (RFP) and consult the district throughout the process.

"There is very little risk for the district other than maintaining your buildings the way that you would normally, because there is no capital invested here – it's all savings," Gabel Associates Director of Advanced Energy Solutions Andrew Conte told the board Monday.

The firm estimated the PPA with HESP will save the district roughly \$560,000 in today's dollars over the 15-year agreement. Bids from two other solar providers were estimated to generate significantly less in energy savings, about \$373,000 and \$353,000 over the course of the deal. A fourth bid was not scored by the evaluation team, as it was deemed to be noncompliant with the RFP due to the bidder falling to agree to put up a performance bond for the project.

Solar vendors are incentivized to participate in PPAs as they are eligible for federal investment tax credits equal to 26 percent of the project cost, among additional state incentives. School districts are incentivized as the PPAs, by state law, must provide them energy savings from what is offered by the electric utility.

After the 15 years is up, Conte said the district could either have the solar arrays removed at the owner's cost, purchase the equipment from the company, or – if state regulations change over the next 15 years – extend the agreement.



The solar arrays would not produce all of the power needed to run the school buildings, and the district would continue to buy much of its electricity from the electric utility.

“Over the course of the year you’re going to consume way more electricity than the systems will provide to the buildings,” he said. “So while the savings isn’t millions of dollars, it is a substantial portion of what you are spending currently on energy.”

Conte said the solar panels will not be visible from the street or ground level. Business Administrator John Csatos added the equipment would only be installed on certain flat portions of the rooftops, with a setback of six feet from the edge of the buildings.

“There’s no way to see it until you’re above the roofline,” said Conte, who also noted the arrays would make very little noise, as opposed to some older solar technology.

He said all construction would be completed next summer after the contractor draws up the designs and secures the proper permits and approvals, including a sign-off from local land use boards.

He and Csatlos noted the agreement has the added benefit of extending the life of the school roofs as the company will apply them with a silicone roof-coating material.

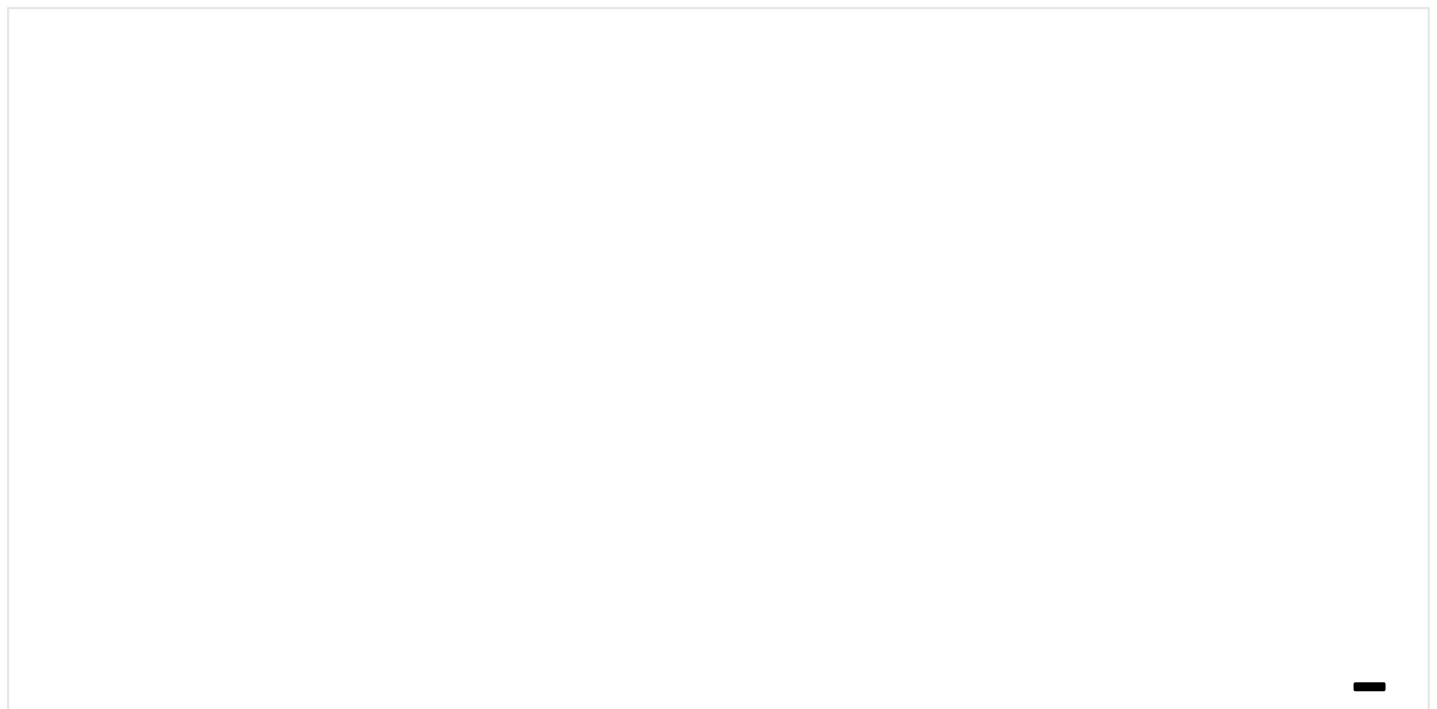
In addition, Conte noted HESP has agreed to provide educational materials to the district related to solar energy. He added that having the equipment will avail the district to recognition or grant opportunities through organizations like Sustainable Jersey.

Csatlos reiterated the opportunity for savings in energy costs.

“This allows us to extend our budget or to reallocate funding that will be saved either into our reserves or to somewhere else in the budget,” he said.



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