

[« Back](#)

Province approves 20MW solar power project in west end

Electricity would flow into city's grid

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A good chunk of the electricity that flows to Sault Ste. Marie outlets could soon be produced courtesy of the sun thanks to a \$120-million plan to build two 10-megawatt solar farms in the city's west end.

The province announced on Friday it has awarded a 20-year power purchase agreement to POD Generating Group, which will build, own and maintain what will be Canada's second-largest solar project.

Completion of the two farms is expected to be before the end of 2008, on sites on Base Line near the area's industrial park.

"We're actually going to be putting the facilities within Sault Ste. Marie, within the city limits, and putting the power back into Sault Ste. Marie's grid," said Glen Martin, POD's president and chief operating officer and a Sault native.

PUC Inc. will still purchase the electricity from the provincial grid, but the two farms would together provide 20MW of clean energy directly to the local distribution grid, rather than out to the provincial transmission grid.

Based on an output of 20MW, the solar panels could supply as much as a quarter of the city's power during low power use periods in the summer, when the city draws an average of between 80 and 85MW. The city's peak power demand comes during the winter. Last year's peak was 137.3MW.

"It is quite significant and it certainly puts us on the map in terms of energy conservation and production in the province," said Dominic Parrella, PUC Inc.'s vice-president of operations and engineering.

Parrella said the new Sault Area Hospital, for example, is projected to use between five and 5 megawatts when it is built.

"Because it generates peak power during the day, when most people are turning on air conditioning units, washing clothes, it's actually going to match the load much more effectively than current generation systems," said Martin.

Martin said the Sault does not have the highest number of daylight hours in the province, but at 1,900 annually he said the economics work. He said the city was considered a good candidate because of a strong local talent base and manufacturing capabilities. The Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre worked as a lead on the project.

Martin said roughly 45 jobs will be created during the construction of each of the two farms, which will be built roughly one after the other. Once the sites are up and running, a maintenance and operations staff of between three and five is expected to be required to, among other things, keep the lenses of the solar panels clear.

A \$400-million wind installation in Prince Township, owned by Brookfield Power, is the country's largest, though the 189MW it produces is fed into the provincial transmission grid.

Brian Curran, PUC Inc.'s president and CEO, said that while the solar project won't put a huge dent in PUC's reliance on the provincial grid, "for solar power it's huge."

He said apart from the economic benefits to the city, the solar project will also be of broader benefit to solar technology, which is currently considered to be an expensive way to generate power.

"These kinds of programs stimulate the advancement of the technology," said Curran. "The cost of photovoltaics continues to drop over time, so we're going to see more and more generation on photovoltaics."

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