

Mohawk Trail Building Subcommittee mulls adding solar panels

By BELLA LEVAVI, Staff Writer, Published: 7/29/2022 4:19:03 PM

BUCKLAND — The Mohawk Trail Regional School District Building Subcommittee is considering adding solar panels to the school roof, although some members are concerned the project would damage the roof.

The Building Subcommittee reviewed a proposal from Solect Energy earlier this week, but did not make a decision on whether to move forward. Solect Energy was chosen in a public procurement process overseen by Power Options, a nonprofit that works with schools and municipalities across the state on renewable energy projects.

Matt Shortsleeve, vice president of Solect Energy, explained the district would not have to pay any money upfront to install solar panels. The Hopkinton-based company does the installation, and then charges Mohawk Trail for the energy it uses. The panels are expected to generate about two-thirds of the school's power, Shortsleeve said. The school uses about 663,000 kilowatt hours of energy monthly.

Many are concerned the solar panels will destroy the roof. The roof was poorly replaced in the 1990s, causing massive damage to the building, according to Building Subcommittee member Scott Purinton. It was replaced again about 10 years ago.

“We are jeopardizing our roof,” said Michael Slowinski, community representative for the Building Subcommittee and Colrain Selectboard chair. “Fred Pazmino (president of Titan Roofing) said it's not worth the risk.”

According to Shortsleeve, the panels screw onto the roof and can be removed in the event of damage.

Once the school district signs a contract, Solect Energy will hire outside engineers to conduct a structural analysis of the property. This analysis may change the cost of energy charged to the school, at which point Mohawk Trail can opt to walk away from the contract and not install the solar panels.

“This is not a young building,” Purinton said. “Maybe we can save \$25,000 a year (on electricity bills) but we are risking hundreds of thousands of dollars in the long run.”

Not everyone was opposed to adding solar panels, however. Alia Woofenden, a member of the Outdoor Advisory Committee, noted, “We have brainstormed many ways having solar on our campus could be integrated into our math and science curriculum.”

Many attendees at this week's meeting pointed to a narrowing window of time to add solar panels to the school. Andrew Baker, a member of Shelburne's Energy Committee and Selectboard, pointed to the fact that federal tax credits for solar panels will decrease from 26% to 22% at the end of this year.

“The bids in January will have to take that into account, and go up,” Baker said in a subsequent interview.

The Building Subcommittee will now connect with staff at other schools who have signed contracts with Solect Energy, and see if they are happy with their product. The board will meet again on Aug. 22 to consider next steps.

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