

## Opinion: Doubling of community solar pilot a new opportunity in South Jersey

he best solar initiative in New Jersey's Clean Energy strategy is making group systems available to communities. The program focuses on larger solar energy systems that can serve low- and moderate-income households, which saw little benefit from \$2.8 billion in past solar subsidies they helped fund.

This year's start of a three-year community solar pilot program authorized 45 projects generating 78 megawatts (MW). Proposals in South Jersey did very well in the first round, with the state Board of Public Utilities awarding them 36% of that capacity.

Among them are a 2 MW project atop an Atlantic County landfill in Egg Harbor Township that will sell discounted power to subscribing Pleasantville Housing Authority residents. Two projects at the Woodbine borough landfill will produce 5 MW each.

This month, the BPU decided to double the capacity of community solar projects in the second pilot year to up to 150 MW.

The pilot mandates that 40% of community solar involve low- and moderate-income communities, and in the first year all projects did. This year may see other sorts of group solar projects, including ones that serve local governments.

The BPU received 252 applications for projects the first year, so the 80% of initial applicants that were rejected already are positioned to apply in year two.

The board also is easing some requirements that should make applying for and implementing projects easier. Previously, for example, project developers had to obtain from subscribers their two most recent federal tax returns. This and other verification problems kept people from getting 10% to 20% savings on their electric bills.

Community solar is meant to "ensure an equitable and inclusive clean energy economy," Joseph Fiordaliso, BPU president, told NJ Spotlight. "A great thing about the pilot program is that you can make adjustments as you go along."

The BPU should follow strictly some important criteria of the program, such as placing the projects on "landfills, brownfields, areas of historic fill, rooftops, parking lots and parking decks." These are lands and surfaces already unsuitable for most productive uses, where the sunlight striking the ground or structure on it is being wasted. Another to consider would be the ground under the many miles of power lines when the time comes to consider utility-sized projects.

The BPU should also be clear on the amount of state subsidies — which are paid by residential and business customers — that will go to community solar and other segments. The state is planning an estimated annual \$800 million in such subsidies starting next year and rising to \$1.4 billion a year by 2030, according to its consultant, Cadmus Group.

Subsidies would be fair for community solar since its beneficiaries couldn't afford to take advantage of the massive solar subsidies New Jersey offered for years.

In other segments, subsidies aren't needed. The Delaware River Port Authority, for example, this year broke ground on a solar project to power its PATCO rail operations. It paid nothing up front and just agreed to buy electricity from the solar developer for 20 years at a price estimated to save \$12 million over regular utility prices. There's no need to make customers pay for someone else's solar project when it already makes financial sense.