Incentives help Massachusetts hit Gov. Patrick's solar energy goal 4 years early

April 17, 2013 | Agawam | Steven Zicolella, co-owner of the land at 369 Main St., until last September, the Mushy's golf driving range, walks where the tees used to be passed an array of about 7700 solar panels now on the site. Rivermoor-Citizens LLC has leased the land for one of two solar panel parks in Agawam. *(Michael S. Gordon/The Republican)*

By **State House News Service**
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STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON — With the assistance of state incentives and a boom in solar installations last year, Massachusetts residents, businesses, municipalities and utilities now have the capacity to harness more than 250 megawatts of power from solar energy and Gov. **Deval Patrick**has achieved a 10-year goal four years early.

Patrick plans to announce the clean-energy milestone on Wednesday afternoon at the Drydock Center in South Boston when he also intends to set a new goal for the state's solar energy future. The solar power now installed in Massachusetts can generate enough electricity to power 37,000 homes for a year.

The governor's new target for solar power could also foreshadow how state energy regulators plan to address the cap on renewable energy credits for solar projects currently under review and expected to increase.

Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Richard Sullivan told the News Service that Patrick was weighing several options for the new solar installation target, but said, "The governor has been a leader in clean energy and an aggressive leader and whatever number he chooses I'm sure will reflect that."

New Jersey has a goal of 4 gigawatts of solar capacity, while Maryland has a 1.3 gigawatt goal.

In 2007, just months after taking office, Patrick said he wanted the state to have 250 megawatts of solar capacity installed by 2017. Massachusetts had just 3 megawatts of solar capacity installed at the time.

Over the next several years, Patrick signed a number of pieces of legislation creating incentives and requirements for utilities to boost their renewable energy sources that led to a mini-boom for the solar industry. Those bills included the Green Communities Act, the Global Warming Solutions Act and the Green Jobs Act

Sullivan said the laws enacted by the Legislature between 2008 and 2010 created a "very solid environment to grow the solar industry," and the new goals "will be certainly furthering the Commonwealth's commitment to growing not only solar deployment in Massachusetts but growing the clean energy sector."

The amount of solar capacity being installed each year in Massachusetts has steadily increased since 2007, climbing from 9.64 megawatts in 2008 to 42.5 megawatts in 2011 and 135.8 megawatts in 2012, according to the Clean Energy Center.

The growth has been achieved through a number of programs incentivizing homeowners, businesses and municipalities to invest in solar energy, including the

Commonwealth Solar program that provides rebates per watt of electricity produced for qualifying homeowners and businesses and the Green Communities program that distributes grants and technical assistance for cities and towns to embrace clean energy options.

The Green Communities Act also created a solar carve-out program in the state Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard allowing solar developers to earn credits that can then be sold to help finance the cost of new solar installations. Utilities are currently required to purchase at least 7 percent of their power generation from renewable sources, including almost 0.3 percent solar.

The solar carve-out program was capped by energy officials at 400 megawatts, but is now under review and in the public comment phase as regulators prepare for what happens once the cap is exceeded, possibly within a year.

"We're eager to see the solar market grow. It's brought a tremendous amount of business and jobs to Massachusetts. We're definitely committed to seeing that not crash and burn," said Dwayne Breger, director of renewable energy at the Department of Energy Resources, in a recent interview with the News Service.

Sullivan said he expected the new regulations pertaining to the solar carve-out cap to be released "very soon," adding, "We're cognizant of the fact that moving the program forward we have to provide certainty in the financing community that the incentives are all there and viable moving forward."

While renewable energy sources like solar and wind have traditionally been more expensive than fossil fuels, the high cost of energy in Massachusetts and state incentives have helped make solar more affordable. Since 2007, average installed costs in Massachusetts have decreased 35 percent, with costs under $4.50 per watt for some solar systems, according to the Clean Energy Center.

The market for wind power has been slower to develop. At the time he set his target for solar growth, Patrick also called for 2,000 megawatts of wind power to be installed by 2020. Similar to solar at the time, the state had a 3 megawatt wind power generating capacity in 2007.

"Right now we're at 100 megawatts deployed and obviously that is all on shore. In order to be able to hit the goal of 2,000 megawatts by 2020, clearly there's going to have to be deployment of megawatts offshore. But you can see how fast both have grown in a little over six years," said Sullivan, noting that Patrick had counted on Cape Wind when he set his target.

According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, residential solar electricity prices dropped 28 percent in Massachusetts in 2012, the second largest decline in the country, and Massachusetts ranks ninth among states in installed solar capacity.

The SEIA would like to see DOER increase the cap on solar energy credits from 400 megawatts to at least 1 to 1.2 gigawatts.

The Massachusetts Clean Energy Center reports that in 2012 clean energy jobs in Massachusetts grew by 11.2 percent over the previous year, with nearly 5,000 clean energy firms employing more than 71,000 workers.