

Northampton gets state grant for solar array at Fire Department to provide power during long-term blackouts

By CHAD CAIN
Staff Writer
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NORTHAMPTON — A new solar array will soon be installed at Fire Department headquarters on Carlon Drive to help the city's emergency response operation keep the lights on during long-term power outages.

The project is funded by a \$525,400 grant from the state Department of Energy Resources, which has launched an initiative to help communities implement clean-energy technologies that ensure emergency-response network remains functional during times of multi-day blackouts.

Two of those events occurred in 2011, when Tropical Storm Irene and a massive Halloween ice storm showed the vulnerability of the region's power system. Mayor David J. Narkewicz said it is vital that the city be able to maintain essential services during critical times, especially when it comes to its ability to respond to emergencies.

"We're excited about this one," he said, referring to the grant. "This grant will help us create more internal resiliency within the city around our own electrical grid."

Over the next few months, the city intends to contract with a third party to install, own, maintain and operate a 20-kilowatt solar array in the Fire Department's parking lot. The canopy-style array will allow vehicles to park underneath and will be about 100-feet long, although the exact number of panels is still being decided, said David Pomerantz, director of Central Services.

The system will include batteries that will store the power for use in emergencies. It will work in tandem with an existing generator on site that has been used for years. The station is the only city facility able to provide an array of emergency services, and it houses the city's emergency command center and its emergency dispatch centers.

While the generators worked fine during Tropical Storm Irene and the Halloween storm, Narkewicz said the goal behind the new system is to build in redundancy and resiliency so that the city can withstand power outages that last for days.

The state grant announced Thursday comes on the heels of another technical assistance grant the city received earlier this year to study the feasibility of linking three of the city's highest-priority emergency facilities together with a shared solar array in a "microgrid."

Those facilities are Cooley Dickinson Hospital, the Department of Public Works and an American Red Cross regional emergency shelter at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School. Like the fire station project, the goal behind this initiative is to improve the city's ability to maintain operations during long-term power failures.

In addition to the initiatives related to emergency services, the city has also landed a \$181,400 grant through the Green Communities program to improve the energy efficiency of several municipal facilities. The money will fund improvements to reduce the city's energy consumption by almost \$50,000 a year.

Northampton was one of six communities to receive a grant this week through the state's new Community Clean Energy Resiliency Initiative. The Department of Energy Resources awarded a total of \$7.4 million in grants in a first round through the initiative, which is part of Gov. Deval Patrick's comprehensive climate change preparedness effort.

The program will award \$40 million to communities that identify the facilities where the loss of electrical service would result in the disruption of a critical public safety or life-sustaining function, including emergency services, shelters, food and fuel supply and communications infrastructure. Municipalities can use the money to implement clean-energy technologies to keep their energy systems operable.

Springfield was the only other western Massachusetts community to receive a grant. That city's \$2.79 million grant will enable Springfield, in partnership with Baystate Health, to develop a 4.6 megawatt combined heat and power plant.

Chad Cain can be reached at ccain@gazettenet.com.