

Solar power hub takes a hit after provincial delay

By Brock Weir

After plans to turn the roof of the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) into a hub for solar power generation were nixed by the Province, Aurora is set to take another crack at making the plan a reality.

Councillors approved a plan at the committee level last week to lease the roof of the SARC to Solera, a Sustainable Energy Company, which would bring \$30,000 a year into Town coffers after the company installs solar panels onto the roof space.

If the agreement is approved next week ? and presuming all the necessary steps are approved by the Ontario Power Authority (OPA) ? the Solera will lease the roof for \$30,000 annually under a 20 year agreement through the Province's revamped Feed In Tariff (FIT) program.

According to reports before Councillors, however, the first rejection of the application last year by the Ontario Power Authority has resulted in a significant reduction of what could have been earned by the Town under the previous agreement. The last proposal stood at \$51,000 per year for the roof space, but was rejected in September 2012.

?We sent in an application and then the Province put the program on hold when they were reviewing the rights,? said Aurora CEO Neil Garbe of Ontario pushing the pause button on the costs of the program, in which revenue is earned back by people with solar panels on however much electricity they pump back into the public power grid.

?When they reopened the rights and reopened the window, we enquired with the province whether we needed to submit an application or whether the current one would suffice. They advised we should submit another application and then we were subsequently told that because we had two active applications we were not eligible.?

The explanation seemed to bemuse both Mr. Garbe and Councillors, including Councillor Gaertner who underscored potential revenue received by the Town would now be 39 per cent less than 2012.

?Who told us that?? she asked.

?I wish I could get a name,? said Mr. Garbe before explaining enquiries like this with the OPA have more often than not lead to a general mailbox ?and you hope someone returns your call. I know [our staff] pull out their hair to try to get answers and it is just not coming forward.?

Councillor Gaertner was not satisfied with the answer questioning the politics that might be behind such a decision at the provincial level in how much they are paying out through the FIT program.

?I can speculate it is to manage the amount of costs the province is seeing in acquiring this type of energy,? said Mr. Garbe. ?They're trying to minimize the amount of costs the province is seeing in acquiring this type of energy. They're trying to minimize the amount of subsidy. What I do know is as the rate drops, the technology gets better and less expensive.?

Despite the drop in revenue, Councillors are expected to ratify going ahead with the recommendation this week. Although the revenue will be less, the roof space at the SARC is currently languishing bringing a total of zero revenue to the Town.

?When the option really came to us the first time, we had the option of doing the project in its entirety ourselves or entering into an agreement with a third party whereupon we would essentially rent the space,? said Councillor Michael Thompson.

For Councillor John Abel, it was a matter of striking while the iron was, although no longer hot, at least still warm.

?I recall when we were putting this forward in 2012, we had a sense of urgency to put this through because we knew the rates would

change,? he said. ?I didn't realise the rental would change [but] this is the cost of how we move sometimes. It is a controversial program that is going on right now. We're entering into that. If we delay much, we'll lose this opportunity as well, I presume.?