

TALK OF THE

# towns

& TOPICS

MAR/APR 2021

**"Help  
is on  
the way"**

*- U.S. Senate Majority Leader  
Charles Schumer on the signing  
of the American Rescue Plan,  
almost a year to the day  
America was shut down.*





# Beyond the Numbers How a Small Town Can Take Full Advantage of Solar Initiatives

Commentary by Anna Castonguay, Member, United Solar Energy Supporters (USES)

Mount Morris is a place that is relatively unknown by anyone outside of the Western New York and Finger Lakes area. Located far from bustling urban communities in Livingston County, it lies 40 miles south of the City of Rochester and 60 miles east of Buffalo. It is best known as being the home of the northeastern entrance to the beautiful Letchworth State Park, the “Grand Canyon of the East,” and the Mount Morris Dam, the biggest dam east of the Mississippi. The landscape around the town is picturesque: hilly and forested to the east, the rushing Genesee River to the north, and rolling farmland bordering the south and west. It spans an area comparable to the size of the Bronx with a population of around 5,000 residents. During the summer, the village of Mount Morris welcomes tourists looking to explore the state park and Finger Lakes trail. For the remainder of the year, the residents enjoy a relatively quiet, tranquil lifestyle. Main Street has kept a nostalgic aesthetic, and the residents are proud of their historic and patriotic past of being the birthplace of Francis Bellamy, the author of the Pledge of Allegiance. Agriculture and mining from the rock salt mines located

to the south are an important part of the local commerce, providing jobs to residents and capital to the town through taxes. Truly, Mount Morris is the quintessential rural community in Upstate New York. And this small town, like many others throughout the state, is taking advantage of its idyllic countryside by incorporating sustainable initiatives.

In 2019, New York State signed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), an ambitious goal of using 70 percent renewable energy by 2030. In order to reach this goal, large-scale development of wind and solar farms are needed across the state, primarily in sparsely populated, rural areas with lots of open land. The solar power developer EDF Renewables chose Mount Morris for the location for Morris Ridge Solar, which, once completed, will produce 177 megawatts of solar production and 83 megawatts of storage. This would provide enough energy to power 38,000 New York homes, the equivalent of nearly all of Livingston County and neighboring Wyoming County combined. Construction of Morris Ridge Solar is expected to provide jobs to up to 200 individuals across 12-18 months starting in 2021, and provide three permanent full-time jobs once operational. Let’s put that into perspective of what that means for the community: according to Data USA, the town’s economy employs around 1,250 people. Bringing in another 200 jobs, although temporary, adds a significant economic boost, and the project also expects to have a positive impact on material supply and construction services, two of the biggest employment sectors in Livingston and Wyoming counties, as well as the hospitality industry. These jobs also require training and the youth of the area, offering lucrative solar career opportunities. The solar enterprise anticipates providing Mount Morris and the local school district with direct payments of \$10 million over the first 20 years. These payments will be meaningful

to Mount Morris Central School District, with an entire annual budget of around \$15 million, and will not cost the residents a cent. The solar facility will cover an area of 1,000 acres of private, cleared land. Compare that to the same amount of farmland that currently provides only about 10 percent of what Morris Ridge Solar’s will contribute to the town and school budget.

But it doesn’t stop there—by hosting a large-scale solar project, Mount Morris received charging stations, courtesy of New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), along its village’s Main Street. There are only three other charging stations currently in Livingston County, so they will give the village a tourism advantage. Having multiple charging stations right in town is a perk that attracts electric car drivers and sustainability-minded visitors, potential customers that might have otherwise visited one of the many other beautiful Finger Lake communities. Charging an electric car can take around 50 minutes, giving the drivers ample time to check out the eclectic antique shops that have congregated along Main Street.

Clearly, these initiatives are lucrative opportunities for Mount Morris, as are most clean energy projects for small towns and their economies. Mount Morris residents are coming up with more innovative and creative ways to make the most of hosting a large-scale renewable energy project. These ideas include how to ensure the next generation will continue to excel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Construction and installation jobs are ideal contracts for trade laborers, and employ electricians, operators, and construction laborers. Mount Morris is home to a campus of Genesee Valley BOCES, one of the biggest cooperative schools in the state. The school offers classes in electro-mechanical, construction, and metal trades, in addition to conservation. Being so close to Morris Ridge solar energy provides real-life opportunities for



students to learn valuable skills that will enhance their resumes and make them competitive job seekers after graduation.

Members of the community are also looking forward to the opportunities that come with having a large plot of cleared land dedicated to solar panels. Developers have found innovative ways to productively utilize the space under the thousands of solar panels, making the space more efficient and enhancing the presentation of what would otherwise be a mundane field of reflective metal. Planting native wildflowers underneath and around the panels can effectively forge a meadow, attracting pollinators and creating a happy cooperation with local beekeepers. Berry bushes can be planted and harvested, providing local produce. Mount Morris residents envision the solar farm as a way for one of the several local breweries to produce a fruity summer beer or a honey flavored lager. The meadows could potentially house pesticide-free, agriculture practices resulting in sustainably and ethically raised livestock that have a smaller carbon-footprint than emission-heavy cattle. Goats and chickens, for instance, would be able to dwell beneath the panels, providing local lamb and goat's milk, chicken meat and eggs to distribute to grocery stores like Wegman's. The town has also begun plans to use the money Morris Ridge Solar is saving it in utilities to extend its public water supply beyond current boundaries and throughout the township. These plans not only contribute the ecosystems, but will create a better and more environmentally harmonious home for the residents of Mount Morris.

The benefits of accepting renewable energy initiatives into small town communities are boundless, especially

when locals are engaged, and developers work to establish partnerships that advance the entire community. Mount Morris is just one of New York's small towns that has earned the designation of being a "Clean Energy Community." Sustainability initiatives are no longer only being

pushed by the state government and downstate, big city dwellers. Rural communities are developing their own initiatives in their own right, and reap the prosperity of the outcomes. They are protecting the land that they love so much, and are creating stronger, more adaptive communities for it. □

*About USES: United Solar Energy Supporters is a grassroots community of advocates including families, landowners, farmers, students, local businesses, skilled trades, and environmentalists who want to support, grow and educate on the value of harvesting sunshine to produce emissions-free electricity. To learn more please go to: [www.usesny.org](http://www.usesny.org).*

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