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Wilton hires consultant to oversee solar installations

By Pat Tomlinson Published 12:00 am, Friday, December 30, 2016

WILTON — The **Wilton Energy Commission** is moving forward with the installation of solar panels at select schools around town after agreeing to hire a “solar expert” to aid in the “complicated” process, Chairperson Debra Van-Thompson said.

After considering up to seven firms for the role, the Energy Commission selected MHR Development, a local development firm that specializes in solar consulting.

Mark Robbins, a principle at MHR, already has a working relationship with members of the Energy Commission. This summer, Robbins assisted the commission in composing the initial bid to the state for the **Zero Emission Renewable Energy Credits** that made the future project a possibility.

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“Some of what we consider our more creative, out-there ideas originated from him,” Van-Thompson said of Robbins’s help during the process.

MHR narrowly beat out the Energy Commission’s second-highest option in Murtha Cullina, a New England business law firm. Despite being more expensive at \$0.07 per watt, Van-Thompson said MHR’s commitment to oversee the day-to-day operation of the solar panels clinched the deal.

“One of the reasons that we want to do this power purchase is that nobody in town has experience managing a large-scale solar panel system,” Director of **Facilities Chris Burney** said.

Aside from managing daily operations of the panels, the Energy Commission’s new “solar expert” will serve the town in various capacities.

At first, MHR will primarily be responsible for expediting the process of securing an installer and financier for the solar panels. Responsibilities will include preparing a request for proposal and stipulated contracts for potential solar vendors, reviewing and evaluating proposals from these potential vendors, and negotiating and preparing the many contracts necessary for installation to begin.

Most importantly, Van-Thompson said, Robbins and his team's expertise in the field will help the town navigate the many complexities hidden away in installation contracts that might otherwise be glossed over.

"There are all kinds of nuances inside of this industry," Van-Thompson said when presenting the commission's decision to the **Board of Selectmen**. "If you worked this [kind of project] before, you know how to build those in [to a contract] and you know what to look for."

For nearly 20 years, MHR and its green energy-based subsidiary Northeast Smart Energy have been responsible for solar installations around the state. Their projects include **Walcott Elementary School** in West Haven, **Farmingville Elementary School** in Ridgefield and they just began working on a new project at the **School Sisters of Notre Dame** in Wilton.

For their services, MHR will receive a one-time up-front fee of \$10,000 for their services. All further fees for MHR will be rolled into the RFP and will be paid for by whichever vendor is ultimately selected.

With a consultant in tow, the Energy Commission hopes to conclude the RFP process for solar vendors by April 3. They hope to begin the solar installation at Middlebrook and Miller-Driscoll schools as early as this summer.

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