

LIFOCUS

Up to the rooftops

With land scarce, solar companies seek commercial roof space for their systems

By **SARAH KIRKUP**

Limited space and restrictions have made it difficult for solar companies to find land on Long Island for their solar system installations, which has led some to set their sights on commercial roofs.

Rather than buying or leasing their own solar electric system, businesses and homeowners can purchase solar energy through a power purchase agreement, in which a solar installer owns and maintains a system and sells power to customers for prices that are lower than local utilities.

Solar companies that sell power through PPAs need space in Long Island for their systems.

Long Island's solar energy demand has soared in recent years. In 2014, SUNation Solar Systems, which has offices in Oakdale and Southampton, doubled its sales and workforce versus the prior year, according to President and CEO Scott Maskin.

"For commercial installations we look for good-quality flat roofs; there are a ton of commercial buildings with so much roof space and this is one way for the company to use that extra space in a positive way," Maskin said.

Solar companies and real estate agents have struggled to



Photo by Bob Giglione

MARIE ZERE: Brokered two large deals in Suffolk County on behalf of solar companies this year.

find suitable land for large-scale solar installations.

Marie Zere, president and CEO of Ronkonkoma-based Zere Real Estate Services, recently brokered two major deals for solar company sPower. The Salt Lake City-based solar company purchased 60 acres of space in Shoreham for \$8 million. The former sod farm will feature a 9 megawatt, ground-mounted solar panel system. sPower also purchased 45 acres of land in Calverton for a 6.3 megawatt system.

Zere said land is becoming more difficult to find and towns are not always welcoming of large solar installations.

"Long Island is running out of land and because of that there has been an upward interest in rooftops," she said.

Zere previously worked with Summit, N.J.-based Nautilus

Solar Energy, which was looking for roofs to lease that were 20,000 square feet or larger in Nassau and Suffolk counties to produce solar energy to sell back to power companies. Nautilus Energy has since moved on to other regions, but Zere works with other solar companies that use PPAs, including Miami-based Conergy and SUNation.

Solar has become more common in part because of the solar Investment Tax Credit, a 30 percent federal tax credit for residential and commercial solar systems that are installed by Dec. 31, 2016. The residential credit is due to be eliminated and the commercial credit will drop to 10 percent after that date. The ITC has helped solar installation grow at a compound annual rate of 76 percent since its 2006 inception, according to the Solar

Energy Industries Association.

Michael Voltz, director of energy efficiency and renewables at PSEG Long Island, predicts more interest in solar power through the end of next year, but a decrease in solar desirability once the tax benefits expire.

"Solar has become much more common on Long Island," Voltz said. "It is good because it is environmentally friendly."

Voltz said systems mounted on commercial roofs can take advantage of net metering, in which solar energy that is not used goes back to the grid and owners of the systems receive credit.

For some Long Island businesses, leasing a solar unit or participation in a PPA is not the way to go. Brothers II, a company that sells business machines, purchased a solar system to mount on the roof of its Bohemia headquarters.

"Leasing it means that we don't own the solar panels, and it did not make a good business idea," said co-owner William Cavallo, who believes other businesses should consider buying a solar system for their roof. "Making small changes like this makes a big difference."

In addition to lower energy bills, solar reduces the amount of fossil fuels released into the atmosphere, Cavallo said.

"Why wouldn't we want to invest in solar energy?" he said. "We are not tree huggers but it's just the right thing to do."