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Bright potential at Tech City

Jim Gordon

It is too soon to say a new day has dawned for manufacturing in New York state, but the March 3 announcement of a solar-panel maker opening in the Hudson Valley suggests a brighter future ... if solar power catches on as a power source. The initial production estimate is 55,000 panels.

Solartech Renewables L.L.C., a startup manufacturing silicon solar panels announced it is setting up a 15,000-square-foot production line at Tech City in the town of Ulster, creating 50 manufacturing jobs with plans for additional production and 50 more jobs within the year.

Hundreds more jobs could be created in coming years, company officials said, provided a market develops for the solar panels they are manufacturing: industrial and commercial scale panels to be marketed as providing clean, reliable electricity at stable prices. The panels use photovoltaic cells lasting 30 years or more and would promote the return of unused power to the grid under Net Metering laws to reap further benefits.

Government incentives across the local-to-federal spectrum have promoted the effort.

The Solartech announcement was made at a press conference at Tech City hosted by Vincent Cozzolino, CEO of The Solar Energy Consortium (TSEC), a nonprofit conglomerate founded in 2007 to attract solar power-related companies to the area.

Officials celebrated the latest addition to the cluster, saying it closed a loop with everything from raw materials for silicon chips to finished solar panels produced in New York state. "In New York state we can actually manufacture from raw materials to electricity," Cozzolino said

"Solartech Renewables will serve as a proud producer of 'Made in America – Made in New York' solar panels within the cluster of solar manufacturers and other solar companies developing in the Tech City complex and the Hudson Valley region," said Todd Roberts, chairman and CEO of Solartech Renewables.

He said besides having other solar businesses at hand, being located adjacent the gigantic potential of the New York metro energy market made the Hudson Valley ideal

for a domestic solar power endeavor. But he said success of the solar cluster depends on generating sales for the materials being produced there.

Although solar power use is doubling annually in recent years, it is still less than one percent of the power supply in New York State. Nuclear power provides 29 percent of New York's energy, natural gas provides 22 percent, coal provides 19 percent, oil provide 12 percent. Hydropower provides 17 percent of New York's power, and wind, biomass and others along with solar power each produce less than one percent of the supply.

"We have the right technology and we have the right business model," said Roberts. "What we have to do is sell it," he said of the solar panel product.

Roberts praised New York officials, saying, "Their clean energy policies, vision and support have made New York the best place in the nation to commission an advanced solar panel manufacturing facility."

This is the best region in the country, because first and foremost, there is a complete alignment of interest at every level of government," said Roberts, praising Gov. David Paterson, U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, Assemblyman Kevin Cahill, Ulster County Executive Michael Hein, town of Ulster Supervisor James Quigley and their staffs.

Solartech was awarded \$1.5 million in manufacturing incentives from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) under its Renewable, Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency Product Manufacturing Incentive Program.

The company also received Empire Zone certification for its Tech City manufacturing facility just prior to the end of 2009. Approximately \$1.7 million in Empire Zone credits and job incentives are expected as a result of this certification. The Empire State Development Corporation is also contributing a \$2 million convertible loan that Cahill helped obtain to bring the company to New York.

TSEC contributed \$600,000 to the effort from a \$2.25 million allocation that Hinchey secured from Congress as part of the fiscal year 2010 budget to help attract new solar companies to the Hudson Valley. His office said Hinchey has brought about \$30 million in federal funding to the area to help fund solar energy companies, and said it will result in some 1,000 new jobs by the end of 2011.

"These types of targeted investments enable solar companies to come to the Hudson Valley to setup their business, create jobs, and contribute to the development of the region's overall economy," said Hinchey.

Solartech Renewables was formed in 2009. It will produce the panels in a former IBM building being renovated to house the production line. The building is sized and the manufacturing process designed to allow for additional production line space to be added as needed.

The company should be operational this year with an initial production capacity of about 55,000 solar panels per year and expansion planned through 2012.

“We are taking orders now,” said Roberts.

The website is solartechrenewables.com.