



More Solar in Store for Arlington's Public Schools

By Rick Keller

On December 1, Arlington Public Schools (APS) [issued a Request for Proposal \(RFP\)](#) that will allow APS to pursue Solar Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) for five of its schools, with bids due March 19, 2018.

The RFP lists Washington-Lee High School, Kenmore Middle School, Tuckahoe Elementary, Thomas Jefferson Middle School, and the under-construction Fleet Elementary School as possible solar recipients. Fleet Elementary was designed and is being built "net-zero ready" in anticipation of this solar PPA. The RFP stipulates that all locations named will receive solar within two years and APS reserves the right to add locations.

The groundwork for this RFP and solar PPAs more generally was laid when the Virginia General Assembly reacted to Dominion Energy's heavy-handed response to a contract entered into by Washington & Lee University for solar power.

Washington & Lee University contracted with a third party for on-campus solar but Dominion sued the school, maintaining its dominion (pun intended) as the power provider in that service area. In response, the General Assembly passed legislation that allows schools, local governments, and non-profits to enter into a PPA for their own facilities (within limits). That provided a path for on-sight photovoltaic solar for qualifying institutions.

The main benefit of a solar PPA is the potential for cheaper power without a capital investment. The solar panels are owned by a third-party which then sells the power generated to the owner of the building. The solar provider also may take the federal tax credit for the installation, a tax break that local governments, schools, and non-profits do not receive.

APS signaled its support for renewable energy with the recently-constructed Discovery Elementary, the first net-zero public facility in Virginia. Net-zero means that the facility produces as much power as it uses over a year (Discovery produces more than it uses over the course of a year and was built under budget). School leadership likewise was on board with a more sustainable model; APS Superintendent Dr. Patrick Murphy was a member of the County's Community Energy Plan (adopted 2013) Task Force and a supporter from day one.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the solar PPA, beyond APS cost savings and long-term sustainability, is that the work that was done can be replicated by other school systems. There are already solar installations planned in Middlesex and Bath counties. The Albemarle school district likewise has installed solar using a PPA.

Closer to home, however, the City of Falls Church, the City of Alexandria, and Fairfax County have not started any process to put solar on their government or school facilities. Under Virginia code they may not utilize Arlington's RFP and must create their own. John Chadwick (Assistant Superintendent for Facilities and an acknowledged leader in school renewable energy thinking) and Cathy Lin (APS Energy Manager) talk with their counterparts in other jurisdictions and hopefully can assist them in moving forward.

Even in Arlington, however, where there has been support for at least five years, it took until now to get to the point of action – and we still need to see what bids come in and at what costs.

This article purposely does not mention Arlington County efforts to bring solar to its local government facilities--that is an article for another newsletter issue. Local governments operate under slightly different rules than schools and the APS RFP cannot be used by the County government. That said, APS efforts were aided by County energy staff and there has been a lot of work on the County side (for example, the renovated Lubber Run Community Center has been designed to be built net-zero). We expect their effort to match the commitment to sustainability shown by APS.

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