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Massive solar project to Wapello

Jim Meenan
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Solar energy project near Wapello is proposed to be constructed on more than 800 acres south of Wapello and generate enough energy for 18,000 homes using around 350,000 solar panels.

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WAPELLO — The Iowa River valley south of Wapello is a nearly unbroken agricultural landscape for miles. During the summer the fields in the area, like most in Iowa during this time, are green with rows of corn and beans, with occasional shelterbelts, farmsteads, pastures, waterways and other corridors wedged between the crops. In winter the fallow ground lies silent, sometimes covered in a white carpet of snow, waiting for the next year's crop.

That classic Iowa rural scene could soon be replaced, according to plans announced Thursday in a press release issued by the Central Iowa Power Cooperative (CIPCO),

Des Moines.

CIPCO, a generation and transmission electric cooperative that includes Eastern Iowa Light and Power, which serves the rural Wapello area, is partnering with a Boise, Idaho firm to build one of the largest solar projects in the Midwest.

Clēnera (pronounced Clean-era) Renewable Energy is planning to establish a 350,000 solar panel farm on approximately 800 acres about two miles south of Wapello by the end of 2020.

Wapello Solar was initially presented to around 50 property owners, local development leaders and a few other interested people during a meeting earlier this year at the Briggs Civic Center (BCC) in Wapello.

Louisa County Board of Supervisor Brad Quigley, who attended that meeting, said the potential community development and economic benefit from the proposed solar farm would be significant.

“A project this size is going to bring in a lot of opportunities,” he said, explaining the venture will be a first for Iowa.

“It’s going to put us on the map and bring a lot of contributory businesses,” he said.

According to an informational packet presented at the BCC meeting, Clēnera officials expect more than \$20 million in county economic benefits to be generated over the life of the project.

More than 350 jobs are expected to be filled during the construction phase of the project. The informational packet pointed to groundbreaking during the first quarter of 2020 and the farm becoming operational during the fourth quarter of that year.

When completed, the 100-megawatt solar facility is expected to generate 215,000 MW-h (megawatt hours) of energy, which will be enough to power 18,000 homes.

Clēnera officials were unavailable this week to confirm the numbers provided during that earlier program.

In its press release, CIPCO announced it would purchase 100 percent of the energy and capacity output for 25 years.

“The project will incorporate the latest in solar array technology to provide cost-effective, clean electric energy. Cutting-edge solar panel technology will be paired with efficient solar inverters and a single-axis tracking system to maximize energy generation,” CIPCO reported.

While the normal corn and bean fields that have blanketed the area in the past will be replaced by rows of solar panel arrays, Quigley said that during the earlier informational meeting the project would feature at least one agricultural component.

He said company officials had indicated the ground would be seeded and sheep brought in control the vegetation. There also was no confirmation of this from Clēnera officials.

“We are thrilled to partner with Clēnera to bring low-cost, clean energy to our members,” said CIPCO CEO and Executive Vice President Bill Cherrier in the CIPCO release. “This is a milestone project as we look to strike a meaningful balance with energy cost, reliability and stewardship for our members. Energy produced by the sun provides an excellent complement to wind energy.

“Energy from Wapello Solar will be produced during our daily and seasonal peak demand times. This is an innovative way for us to offer reliability and efficiency to CIPCO’s energy portfolio.”

The Wapello Solar project meets Clēnera’s mission of adding low-cost solar energy to the grid, according to co-founder and CEO Jason Ellsworth.

“It is a very exciting time,” said Dawn Sly-Terpstra, vice president of corporate

communications with CIPCO. “It is (a huge break for Wapello). It’s a historic day.”

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