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Sun shines on Coast's solar farm project

Sunshine Coast Council's quest to become Australia's first local government to offset its entire electricity consumption from green energy is powering ahead, with Mayor Mark Jamieson today announcing Downer has been awarded the tender to construct a 15 megawatt (MW) solar farm on council-owned land.

The South East Queensland council is striving to become Australia's most sustainable region and the council's Sunshine Coast Solar Farm at Valdora is part of a grand plan to achieve that vision.

Mayor Jamieson said Sunshine Coast Council would become the nation's first local government to build a utility scale, grid-connected solar farm.

"The 15MW solar farm, covering 24 hectares of a 49 hectare site at Valdora, will be the biggest solar farm in Queensland - the next largest being the Gatton Solar Farm at 3.3MW - and the fifth largest solar farm in the nation," Mayor Jamieson said.

"By 2017 it will offset 100% of the organisation's electricity consumption across all its facilities and operations, with solar energy going into the grid.

"That includes our administration buildings, swimming pools, performance venues and community centres, our holiday parks, libraries and art gallery and our sport and recreation facilities.

"Most other governments are still talking about offsetting 50% of their energy needs from renewables by 2025 so our 100% offset puts us way ahead of the game and that's a win for our environment and our community.

"And it doesn't stop there. The solar farm is also estimated to save this council millions of dollars over a 30-year period based on today's electricity costs, which are anticipated to increase substantially in the future.

"Every Sunshine Coast ratepayer will benefit from the certainty this project will provide in regard to council's electricity expenditure and in the context of combating rising electricity costs.

"This project will see us proactively take control of our electricity supply, isolating council from increased price risk.

"The Sunshine Coast Solar Farm will, at its peak, generate 15,000 kilowatts of electricity from the sun. Over one year the solar farm will generate sufficient electricity to power approximately 5000 homes."

Divisional and Economic Development and Innovation Portfolio Councillor Stephen Robinson described the game-changing project as a major step forward for the council, its residents and the clean technologies sector.

"This is certainly an exciting initiative which provides real savings for this council and therefore our ratepayers, while positioning us as leaders in the renewable energy space," Cr Robinson said.

"Our residents can be very proud of the positive economic and environmental outcomes this project will deliver.

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“Council has undertaken extensive analysis on the potential budget savings the solar farm project will provide.

“Naturally any savings forecast includes the up-front build costs, in addition to the ongoing operational costs for the farm.”

Downer Utilities Executive Director Trevor Cohen said as one of the largest and most experienced providers in renewable energy, the company was delighted to partner with Sunshine Coast Council in its next step towards realising its aspiration to become Australia’s most sustainable region by designing, constructing, operating and maintaining the largest solar farm in Queensland.

“The Sunshine Coast Solar Farm construction will see Downer install more than 57,000 PV (photovoltaic) modules, close to 1500 support structures, and six inverter stations as well as a number of civil and structural work including a control room, access track and road widening, and medium voltage (MV) underground lines,” Mr Cohen said.

“The innovation we are applying to the project will see the Sunshine Coast Solar Farm become the first solar farm in Australia to operate at 1500 VDC.

“Currently, solar farms in the country are built to 1000 VDC.”

Energex Chief Executive Officer Terry Effeney congratulated Sunshine Coast Council for this clean green initiative.

“We have been very pleased to work with the Council to see this project come to reality. Energex sees Grid Scale Projects like this as a key part of our low-carbon future,” Mr Effeney said.

Diamond Energy is the council’s energy retailer. Managing Director Tony Sennitt commended the council for taking control of its electricity supply and was excited to help bring the Sunshine Coast Solar Farm dream to reality.

“Sunshine Coast Council is leading by example and showing Queensland residents how to combat rising electricity costs while supporting a clean energy future,” Mr Sennitt said.

“The new energy future is about using our plentiful natural resources, so let’s turn on the sunshine and deliver more energy to this pro-active local council.”

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