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Somerset County Freeholders advance renewable energy program



SOMERVILLE - The Somerset County Board of Freeholders is looking to move forward with a Renewable Energy Program now that the county's Energy Council has endorsed it.

"This program has the potential to put Somerset County on the cutting edge of using renewable-energy technologies to benefit both the environment and the taxpayers," said Freeholder Deputy Director Jack M. Ciattarelli, the council's liaison.

The Freeholder Board has asked the County Administrator to outline what is needed to commence the program. The Freeholders plan on discussing those details in September, Freeholder Ciattarelli said.

The Energy Council's endorsement follows a presentation made at the April 28 freeholders' meeting by DeCotiis, Fitzpatrick, Cole & Wisler LLP and Gable Associates on a proposed Somerset County Renewable Energy Program, modeled after the Morris County Improvement Authority's solar initiative. The April presentation detailed the regulatory, equipment and financing requirements of installing solar panels on county, municipal and school buildings throughout Somerset County.

"The county is in a unique and advantageous position to improve the potential value of this initiative," Energy Council Chairman William Amann, P.E., LEED AP, said in a letter to Freeholder Ciattarelli. "We feel that the Energy Audit program now underway provides a beneficial vantage point that can be utilized to help identify and qualify potential buildings."

The Energy Council further recommends that the initiative be established not only to provide solar energy systems, but also to allow for the inclusion of energy-conservation measures. Energy conservation is a top priority of the New Jersey Energy Master Plan, Amann noted.

Freeholder Ciattarelli credited the 11-member Energy Council with conducting a thorough due-diligence assessment of DeCotiis's proposed program, including a series of detailed questions that were subsequently answered by the consultant. The topics ranged from land-use issues to financing to potential exit strategies.

He said this new initiative builds on a number of energy-efficiency programs and systems already in place. "Somerset County continues to demonstrate unparalleled environmental leadership," Freeholder Ciattarelli said, pointing to the county's growing fleet of hybrid gas-electric vehicles, its LED traffic-light conversion program, its energy-efficient county administration building and its curbside recycling program as examples.

Somerset County was the first county in New Jersey to form an Energy Council, in 2008. The same year, Freeholder Robert Zaborowski announced the creation of a new Energy Audits Grants Program to help municipalities and school districts in Somerset County to conduct energy-usage assessments of their various buildings.

The Freeholders helped finance the construction of a co-generation facility at Raritan Valley Community College. Most recently, RVCC became the first community-college in the nation to sign an environmental stewardship agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.