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## BALTIMORE COUNTY

# Baltimore County seeking deal to put solar panels on government buildings and in parks

By Alison Knezevich  
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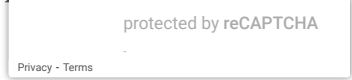
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Baltimore County officials are considering placing solar panels on a variety of government properties — from a community center in Randallstown to a police station in Dundalk and a park in Lansdowne.

The tentative plan, coming three years after an earlier county effort faltered, was disclosed in a request for proposals posted on a county website. The documents explain the installations would help the county achieve its goal of generating 20% of municipal power needs from renewable sources by 2022.

County officials have identified more than a dozen public properties for possible solar arrays, including the rooftops of the Dundalk police precinct, the Randallstown Community Center, and the elections board office in Hunt Valley. They also are exploring the idea of placing the panels in public parks — which could prompt objections to green energy taking up green space.



Officials are soliciting design proposals from solar development firms that would install, operate and maintain the panels, while selling the power to the county. Bids are due June 18, and county officials emphasized that the plan isn't finalized.

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“There are no final decisions” about the locations, said T.J. Smith, spokesman for County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr.

During his campaign last year, Olszewski, a Democrat, pledged to create a timeline for Baltimore County to eventually get 100% of its energy from renewable sources. His first budget, approved this month by the County Council, includes funding for a “chief sustainability officer,” a new position that would oversee investments in renewable energy and develop a strategy to deal with **flooding and extreme weather**.

This latest effort follows **one announced in 2016 by the late County Executive Kevin Kamenetz** that would have installed solar panels at four county sites. That project fell through.

Now the county is looking to enter a power purchase agreement with a solar company at no upfront cost to the government. The county would get renewable energy and the developer would get financial benefits, such as tax credits and income from the sale of electricity.

Counties throughout Maryland have turned to solar on municipal properties — both for cost savings and environmental benefits. But while solar power is popular in the abstract, the installation of arrays can be controversial. In Baltimore County’s rural communities, for instance, residents have **challenged plans for solar developments**, saying they would eliminate productive farmland and diminish home values.

A leading Maryland environmentalist says it makes sense for local governments to pursue clean energy because they have to deal with flooding and other effects of climate change.

“So they have a direct interest in moving towards climate solutions,” said Josh Tulkin, director of the Maryland Sierra Club.

Back in 2012, officials unveiled a 4,200-panel array at the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant in Essex, which is owned by Baltimore city government and serves both city and county residents.

In recent years, Garrett County in Western Maryland worked with the solar developer SolarCity to install ground-mounted solar arrays at a refuse drop-off site, and on county-owned land near a public works garage and a wastewater treatment plant.

Last year, solar fields were completed at two Montgomery County parks. And Howard County uses solar panels at properties including libraries in Ellicott City and Columbia, the Robinson Nature Center and a closed landfill.

Baltimore County passed legislation in 2017 regulating commercial solar installations, but the issue remained a hot one as **the council weighed a moratorium on such development in rural areas** earlier this year. The moratorium proposal's sponsor, Republican Wade Kach of Cockeysville, **withdrew it because other council members didn't support the idea**.

While the location of solar installations can be divisive, others embrace the energy source.

"I think it's terrific for our county government to sort of lead by example," said Beth Miller of the Green Towson Alliance, whose platform calls for county properties to incorporate renewable energy sources. Still, "there's a lot of controversy about ground-mounted solar, where it's appropriate and where it's not, so I'd be interested to learn more about the parks."

The county's request for proposals lists 13 possible sites.

It identified five sites for rooftop solar. In addition to the Randallstown, Dundalk and Hunt Valley locations, the county is considering the detention center in Towson and a maintenance facility in Glen Arm.

The detention center has had solar panels on it for years, but they aren't being used.

The county listed four locations as possibilities for ground-mounted solar: closed landfills in Woodstock and Parkton; Mount Vista Park, a former golf course in Kingsville; and Southwest Area Park in Lansdowne.

Four other parks were identified as properties where solar panels could be installed on parking lots or carports: Honeygo Run Regional Park in Perry Hall; Reisterstown Regional Park; Eastern Regional Park in Chase; and Meadow Wood Regional Park in Lutherville.

Smith said the sites listed in the request are merely possibilities.

"There haven't been any determinations yet on where they're going to go," Smith said.

In 2016, Kamenetz, a Democrat, announced that the county would work with SolarCity to **install solar arrays at the closed landfills and Mount Vista and Southwest Area parks**. He also set the goal to use renewable energy sources to generate at least 20% of the county government's electric demand by 2022.

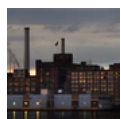
Tulkin attended the news conference at which Kamenetz announced the solar installation plans, which were projected to save the county \$450,000 in the first year.

After that, "I stopped hearing about it," Tulkin said.

Former County Executive Don Mohler, who was Kamenetz's chief of staff at the time, said he wasn't directly involved in negotiations, but remembers that the developer was having difficulty coming up with a profitable plan.

"We had an agreement in principle, but we had to work out the details and we were never able to," Mohler said. "I remember County Executive Kamenetz being very disappointed."

Tesla, the electric car company that acquired SolarCity the same year Kamenetz announced his plan, declined to comment on the project.



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County officials said at the time there were no upfront costs to the county.

The plan sparked concerns about losing green space at Mount Vista Park.

“My constituents do not want these solar panels on a public park,” Councilman David Marks, a Perry Hall Republican whose district includes the park, said recently. “Rooftops are fine, but not green space.”

Council Chairman Tom Quirk, whose district includes the Southwest Area Park, said other members have similar concerns. He said he doesn’t have a problem with solar panels on the parking lots of parks, but doesn’t want them to take up any green space.

“The consensus of the council is we don’t want the solar panels on parkland or open space,” the Oella Democrat said. “I would not want to see solar panels placed in a park. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

Marks said he hopes the Olszewski administration will listen to residents’ suggestions.

“The way the former administration did this was completely wrong,” he said. “There was no community input. And when you’re dealing with publicly owned land, there needs to be some engagement with the public.”



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