



Opinion: Mercer County Community College solar project has huge benefit

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By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

By Mark Matzen and Phil Miller

In recent weeks, the solar energy project to be installed by the Mercer County Improvement Authority (MCIA) at Mercer County Community College (MCCC) has been questioned by some local residents, who have brought up various concerns, only some of which relate directly to the project.

We would like to correct the misimpressions and restate the very significant academic and operational benefits of this renewable energy initiative.

The facts are these: The 8.0-megawatt solar project at MCCC will be installed on approximately 45 acres of open field owned by the college (not 67, as has been reported). It will create no air pollution, no noise pollution, no light pollution, no traffic, nor any of the other problems typically associated with development. No one's health will be jeopardized. The closest solar panel to any individual home is 100 yards away – that's a football field away.

The environmental benefits of the project are without question. It will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, according to project engineers, the installation will reduce annual atmospheric carbon dioxide emissions equivalent to the benefits of a forest containing more than 1,500 acres of pine or fir trees.

The electricity generated is equivalent to the electricity needed to power more than 850 homes every year. This will reduce the burden on the



Michael Mancuso/The Times

A large solar panel farm like this one, located at The Lawrenceville School, off of Route 206 in Lawrence, is being planned for the Mercer County Community College campus in West Windsor.

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electricity grid, especially during periods of high electricity usage, increasing the reliability of the aging grid network. And, on a larger scale, the project will reduce our dependence on foreign sources of energy.

Also without question are the financial benefits to the county and the college. The installation will generate enough electricity to meet approximately 70 percent of the college's energy needs, saving approximately three-quarters of a million dollars annually.

Additionally, the installation will serve as a hedge against future rate increases. And, once the lease arrangement under which the system is being installed expires after 15 years, MCCC will have the option to assume ownership for the remaining 10 to 15 years of the system's life, which will yield even greater rewards in terms of electricity savings.

In addition to channeling the savings back into college programs and services that were cut because of budget constraints, MCCC is also excited about the multiple ways the solar project will foster academic opportunities for MCCC students. Among the degree programs whose curricula will be directly enriched are solar/energy technology, engineering science and our new sustainability degree program, which begins in the fall of 2012. Additionally, horticulture students will have the opportunity to oversee the selection and planting of new trees to replace any trees that will be removed. The solar project's energy output will provide real-time data that will enable students to conduct cross-disciplinary studies of alternative energy and sustainability. Providing such learning opportunities breaks new ground in community college education as we prepare students for a world that will move further and further away from oil consumption into greener technologies.

The project has been carefully planned for more than a year by multiple experts in the field of renewable energy. It has been brought before all governmental boards as required, as well as before forums not required. In addition, the Mercer County Soil Conservation District stated that when the project is completed, the soil will be in better condition than it is now. It has also received clearance from Sunoco Logistics, which owns an underground pipeline on the site.

We have made our plans transparent, including multiple articles in the media, dating back to January 2011, and a front-page story in the college's summer 2011 newsletter, which is mailed out to 20,000 community members. The MCIA and MCCC have made extensive efforts to notify and inform all local residents of the details of the project. Notices were sent to individual homeowners, and we have hosted two meetings with the residents, with experts on hand to explain the project and address concerns. Residents have received prompt responses to their questions. A meeting on May 31 with the residents will continue this dialogue.

Detailed information on the MCIA/MCCC solar project, including a fact sheet, is available at www.mcia-nj.com. We invite all area residents to become informed about the benefits of the project and hope they will share our

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enthusiasm about its tremendous potential for the environment, for student learning and for a healthy budgetary bottom line for the college and county.

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