

## New Bedford Builds Its Reputation with Solar Panels

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The post-industrial cities of the Northeast have plenty of catching up to do. Or at least, that's the dominant narrative. But New Bedford is working hard to build a new and glowing reputation by capitalizing on renewable energy opportunities.

"One of my main priorities as mayor is to improve the city's overall image," said New Bedford mayor Jon Mitchell. "Being seen as progressive on renewable energy and other green initiatives can be a very powerful antidote to the stigma associated with being a post-industrial city."

After four years of an aggressive municipal renewable energy initiative, a report by Environment Rhode Island Research and Policy Center, "Shining Cities: At the Forefront of America's Solar Energy Revolution," has featured New Bedford as an up-and-coming solar power leader. The report says only New York City is ahead of New Bedford in installing solar in the Northeast.

"We have stepped forward as the leader in municipal renewable energy programs," Mitchell said in a State of the City address. "The city is now purchasing more electricity from solar than any municipality in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

In 2013, the Massachusetts State Energy Office gave New Bedford a "Leading by Example" award in recognition of its strong commitment to renewable energy.

"Every city needs to play its part in reducing carbon emissions, and for us, solar was one of the answers," Mitchell said. "I do take to heart the idea that to affect climate change we have to act locally."

New Bedford's civic leaders see solar power as a way to save the city and its taxpayers money, build the city's reputation nationally, promote environmental responsibility, teach youth about energy-related careers, reuse contaminated brownfields safely, and create local jobs in a small but growing industry.

That's a lot of leverage for New Bedford's taxpayer dollars. According to documents from Mayor Jon Mitchell's office, the city will spend \$53 million to install the solar power and will save \$29 million from this investment during the next 20 years. During 2015 alone, the city will save around \$900,000. Over 12 MW of solar power have already been installed, the Shining Cities report says.

And New Bedford needs all the leverage it can get. According to the website of the Southcoast Urban Indicators Project, residents of the Providence/Fall River/New Bedford metro area have a per capita income of only \$20,447 – much lower than the \$33,966 that is the average in Massachusetts. Also, the area's cost of living is second only to Boston when compared with other Massachusetts metro areas.

Building a brighter future for New Bedford depends, in part, on attracting new jobs in growing industries to the area. The solar and wind industries are two industries that local leaders hope can provide economic growth. According to the law firm WilmerHale, ConEdison Solutions agreed to maximize the employment of local contractors when it signed paperwork to own the installations and enter into a long-term power purchase agreement. Beaumont Solar, a second company participating in this initiative, is giving preference to local job candidates and has hired graduates of New Bedford's technical high school.

On a contaminated brownfield near a middle school and high school, the city has contracted with Con Edison Solutions and Blue Wave Capital to build a solar project. This solar installation is intended to be used to support energy education at these schools and encourage students to consider working in the renewable energy industry.

Project partners will also construct a solar farm on top of a Superfund site known as Sullivan's Ledge. This is an unusual use of Superfund sites, Mitchell said.

New Bedford's government is also seeking to engage homeowners in a solar program called New Bedford Energy Now. This program hires local contractors. According to a radio interview by Living on Earth, the program provides relatively affordable rates, thanks to a creative financing arrangement in which Real Goods Solar owns both the solar panels and the energy they produce. The company installs the panels for free and then sells the power to homeowners at a discounted rate. Mitchell said he is interested in seeing this program expand in the future.