

Solar panels proposed for Science Center parking lot fuel debate in Federal Hill

Fern Shen, *Baltimore Brew*, January 18, 2011

A plan by the Maryland Science Center to allow Constellation Energy Group to put solar panels on carport-like structures in the Center's Key Highway parking lot is sparking opposition from some Federal Hill residents, who say the project will be an eyesore blocking views of the Inner Harbor.

"There's no way this is not going to be very visible and take away what little open space is left around this part of the Harbor," said Michael Brassert, who lives up the hill on Montgomery Street. "If this were being proposed in Patterson Park people would be going nuts about it, but because this land is already tainted by a parking lot, we're supposed to just accept this?"

But some Federal Hill neighbors — inclined to like the green message sent by the urban "solar farm" — are making basically that argument.

"It's a parking lot, it's not going away," said John Ginovsky, who also lives on Montgomery Street. "This is pretty much what the Science Center is there to do. You get thousands of kids and visitors there and this would educate them about a form of energy that's so important."

In an email to the neighborhood listserv — which has been humming over the subject since a Federal Hill Neighborhood Association meeting last week — Ginovsky wrote that the solar structures' educational value "outweighs the importance of the sliver of Harbor view."

Solar panels at the parking lot of the Springs Preserve, run by the Las Vegas Valley Water District. Could the Science Center be planning something like this? (photo credit hotgardens.net)

The subject will get a fuller airing tonight, at a meeting of the association to look at the latest version of the solar array, first discussed with Federal Hill residents last spring.

"This is the third or fourth iteration we've come up with to deal with the neighbors' concerns," said Maryland Science Center president and chief executive officer Van R. Reiner, heaving a heavy sigh.

Showcase for solar

The MSC is proposing is to allow Constellation to build the structures and install the panels, which the utility would then own. The Science Center would sign a 20-year-lease, promising to buy the energy generated back from Constellation, Reiner said.

Reiner acknowledges that the solar supplement “is not going to make a significant dent” in the center’s monthly bill, which is about \$33,000. The solar panels may reduce that bill by \$450.

“We’ll be able to generate about 96 kilowatts per hour on a sunny day,” Reiner said. “When we first proposed this, it was going to be a lot more.” He said the center consumes about 6,790 kilowatts daily.

So what’s the point? To educate and inspire visitors about the potential for forms of energy that do not generate CO2 and other greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming, Reiner said.

“We have an obligation to showcase technology and especially technology with a positive impact on society,” he said.

Reiner said the center has had a solar array on the roof generating electricity for four years and other small-scale solar demonstration displays but wanted to move to a more visible and meaningful one with the current project.

Maryland Science Center parking lot. Some say the planned solar panels on carport-like structures there would be an eyesore. (Photo by Fern Shen)

Constellation, which will be represented at tonight’s meeting, declined via a spokesperson’s email, to discuss the project and referred a reporter to Reiner in the meantime.

Just how big the parking lot solar set-up would be is a little hard to say, since the proposal has been scaled back, Reiner said.

“It’s not going to be ‘hundreds of panels,’ it was never going to be ‘hundreds of panels,’” Reiner said, in response to the way the project has been characterized by some residents.

An earlier plan was to place the structures on the upper and lower parts of the lot but now, in an effort to make them less obtrusive, they’re being proposed for only the lower lot, the one closer to the water. (See illustration above, circulated by the Science Center at last week’s meeting.)

Asked how tall the structures would be, Reiner said “just tall enough for cars to park under them.” Their color? Blue, he said. What angle will they be set at? “Five degrees,” he said. “Any more and a strong wind could lift them right up and you’d have a safety issue.”

The lower lot is four feet below the upper lot, according to Reiner, which would, he said, mean the top of the structures where the panels would sit would be obscured from view at street-level by the cars parked on the upper lot.

Among those involved in talks between the science center and citizenry so far are City Councilman William H. Cole IV and Irene Van Sant, of the Baltimore Development Corporation.

“The BDC is the reason we haven’t been able to complete this deal so far,” Reiner said. “They won’t sign off on anything until it’s satisfactory to the community.”

Water views a touchy topic

Paul Robinson, president of the Federal Hill Neighborhood Association, has been listening to the back-and-forth for months and promises to do as the community collectively wishes. He’s not expecting the planned structure to look beautiful. “All carports are ‘ugly’ by their very nature.”

But he said he remains open-minded about the project and is supportive “of the argument that it is in this country’s best interests to develop viable alternatives to fossil fuel as an energy source.”

“One could reasonably argue that with this installation and their ongoing solar panel program MSC is proposing to play an important role in the process of determining if solar power can play a vital role in our country’s future,” he wrote, in an emailed clarification of earlier comments.

Though many neighbors like the message that even symbolic solar sends, he also thinks critics are raising valid points and shouldn’t be dismissed as NIMBY’s.

“‘Obstructionist’” is the word that is used, he said.

Some neighborhood critics say a broader public debate is warranted by proposals that may take the Harbor area further down the path of commercialization, a departure from earlier promises that Inner Harbor land would be used “for the recreation and enjoyment of all of Baltimore.”

“If the Science Center really wanted to be green they would encourage people to take public transit and put the solar panels at a park-and-ride lot,” Brassert said. “We should think long and hard before cluttering up the Harbor for something like this, even if it’s well-intentioned.”

Somewhere, beyond the Ritz-Carlton condominiums, there

Robinson thinks there’s an argument to be made for preventing visual pollution, as well as air pollution, especially since many views of the Harbor have been allowed to virtually disappear in recent years beneath a proliferation of high-priced condominiums like the Ritz-Carlton Residences on the south side of the Harbor.

“In the past, the neighborhood association has rolled over for this, leading to the point where it’s hard to even see the water,” he said. “They promised a view and what do we end up with? Not much.”

Now, the Science Center’s solar project is being proposed in what Robinson said is “a view corridor down Williams Street” as defined by city ordinance. “Would this be in violation of that?” Robinson said. A lot depends on how the array would look and whether it would actually block views.

“I’m confused, I really am,” he said, “But the community has to weigh this for themselves.”