



Tour a Solar Power farm from the air 3:44



BUSINESS

Macon Telegraph

MAY 11, 2017 7:37 PM

## Plans in the works for one of Georgia's largest solar farms near Robins

BY LINDA S. MORRIS  
lmorris@macon.com

One of the largest solar farms in Georgia is expected to be built in Middle Georgia.

Georgia Power is planning to build and operate a 139-megawatt solar generating facility north of Robins Air Force Base in what is known as an encroachment area, pending approval by the Georgia Public Service Commission.

"It is large, a very large solar farm," said John Kraft, with Georgia Power's media relations department.

"It's a great location ... in the middle of the state," Kraft said. "It's available use of land that might not have other uses as is. Also, it's adjacent to the Air Force base so we can tie it into the base and help Robins meet its energy resiliency and security goals."

The solar facility would serve Georgia Power's grid "to the benefit of all customers" and would provide electricity to its overall system, he said.

Although the use of solar energy to produce electricity might not lower residential electric bills, "a primary goal is so electricity doesn't cost residents more," he said. "We anticipate ways it would be available to the base to support their energy security needs in a special kind of situation should that occur."

Georgia Power has developed other solar projects on military installations in Georgia, including Fort Benning near Columbus and Fort Gordon near Augusta.

While Kraft couldn't say at this point how many acres the facility would take, the 30-megawatt solar facility at Fort Gordon covers more than 200 acres, he said.

The project came up at the Georgia Public Service Commission's energy committee meeting Thursday, and it is expected to be considered by the full commission Tuesday.

PSC Commissioner Tim Echols said in an email this week that while he couldn't comment much about the project until it comes before the commission, "I tend to think it is a good thing for the base and the community because it makes the base more BRAC-proof in case the closure commission makes their rounds again."

BRAC, or the Base Realignment and Closure Commission, is a process by the federal government to increase efficiency by realigning and closing certain military installations.

"This is a good location because most of the land is unusable for other purposes due to the proximity to the base and runways," Echols said.

The proposed solar facility would use both a fixed tilt for 120 megawatts and a single-axis tracker system for 19 megawatts, according to a memorandum presented to the energy committee Thursday.

If approved by the PSC, it is expected to be in operation by Dec. 1, 2019, the memo said.

"The FAA evaluation guidelines ensure that proposed photovoltaic systems are safe and pose no risk to pilots, air traffic controllers or airport operations," it said.

During the committee meeting, U.S. Air Force Capt. Lanny Zieman spoke on behalf of Robins Air Force Base.

"We would like to thank Georgia Power for working this project with us," he said. "There has certainly been a lot of collaboration and cooperation to make this meet joint goals. ... We think this will be a really good project."

### Uses restricted in encroachment area

The solar project has been in the works for about five years, said Laura Mathis, executive director of the Middle Georgia Regional Commission. But it came along years after local governments realized an area north of RAFB where some homes and other buildings were located would prevent the base from growing its missions. So through an agreement with Bibb and Houston counties about eight years ago, the Central Georgia Joint Development Authority became responsible for buying properties in the encroachment area, and it received funds from the federal government to do so, she said. See a map of encroachment area with this story at [www.macon.com](http://www.macon.com).

However, the encroachment zone has restrictions on how it can be used.

"So, the goals the authority set were, first, do no harm ... to Robins Air Force Base," Mathis said. "The second goal, is there some reuse of the property that would help Robins in some way, ... and third, is there some greater good that can come from the reuse of this property."

Then on a parallel track more recently, was a discussion of a partnership with Georgia Power, she said. Georgia Power is under a mandate from the Public Service Commission to help take care of military installations.

"It's taken this long to get to this point," Mathis said. "In total, the authority owns about 800 acres ... this (solar facility) is going on a portion of that."

According to the PSC memo presented Thursday, Georgia Power is expected to have rights to the facility site at no cost based on a 35-year lease with the authority, which begins when construction starts.

Four large solar projects have been built in Taylor County, and Georgia Power buys electricity from the owners. The last one, completed in fall 2016, covers 900 acres. The four solar farms total nearly 300 megawatts.

David McLeighton, chairman of the Taylor County Development Authority, said the investment made in the solar facilities "was up in the millions of dollars."

While the county has not yet seen any revenue from the solar farms, it is expecting real estate taxes and equipment taxes to begin flowing into the county's coffers.

"I haven't seen anything that's a downside," McLeighton said. "This was rural land. ... (A solar facility) doesn't bring many jobs ... but it does bring in revenue."

Linda S. Morris: 478-744-4223, @MidGaBiz

