



Solar-power plants booming in Gila Bend

Construction workers descend on Ariz. town to build power plants

Ryan Randazzo - Aug. 28, 2011 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic NEWS EXCERPT

It's lunchtime in Gila Bend, but the 30 or so people lined up at Little Italy for pizza and subs aren't the typical summer visitors passing through town on their way to San Diego or the beaches of Mexico. And with outside temps nearing 110 degrees, they aren't the snowbirds that flock to the desert town 75 miles west of downtown Phoenix every winter to enjoy the warm weather. Reflecting a dramatic economic shift taking place in the town of about 2,000 residents, nearly everyone in the restaurant is wearing a shirt labeled with a construction company or solar company involved with one of the three power plants under way in or near the town.

Solar boom in Gila Bend

About 850 construction workers have descended on Gila Bend to work on the plants this summer, and about double that number are expected next year as the largest alternative-energy project in the state, the Solana Generating Station, ramps up construction.

Solar-power plants and wind farms are popping up across Arizona, but Gila Bend is uniquely positioned to benefit because of its intense sunshine and town zoning policy enacted last year that fast-tracks solar plants, saving companies time and money in their permitting.....

....Town officials are eager to capitalize on the millions of dollars in economic benefits that the solar construction workers bring, and also are developing plans to build a small economy around the industry once the power plants are complete and construction jobs disappear.

"The town had a connotation that wasn't the most flattering thing for many years," Town Manager Rick Buss said. "It is time for us to change that mind-set. We are reinventing Gila Bend. We have the opportunity to become the solar capital of the world. It is a matter of going after it. It takes time and effort."

Projects and plans

.... At least 11 other power plants have been proposed in or near the town, largely as a result of the easy zoning rules. The only thing limiting Gila Bend's potential is that only APS can tap into the power produced in the region, and there's a limit to how

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much solar energy one utility will use.

APS faces a state requirement to get 15 percent of its energy from renewable power sources by 2025 and will buy power from Solana and own the other two Gila Bend solar plants when they are done. Coupled with other alternative-energy efforts, APS already plans to exceed the state requirement.

Gila Bend town planners are hoping to encourage new power lines in the area that could carry electricity to markets in California or even Mexico, Buss said.

"We've had initial thoughts of serving power to Mexico, which also has a renewable-energy (requirement)," he said. "If we can get transmission lines to Mexico, we can get them power."

A 50-mile line would open up the California market, he said.

The benefits of building solar in Gila Bend are clear, especially compared with other communities that have seen their housing-construction jobs dry up.

The solar companies have a policy to hire locally when possible, but there aren't near enough workers in the town or even nearby communities to fill the need. Some of the workers commute from as far away as Mesa.

"We only have so many people," Buss said. "We actually went out and made formal presentations at council meetings in Buckeye, Maricopa, Avondale. We've reached out to our neighboring communities. We are working hand-in-hand with those communities. There is plenty to go around if we do this together."

Solar zoning

Geisler said that the Paloma and Cotton Center projects were a direct result of a solar-development zone the town made, which allowed the utility to sign deals with Solon and First Solar and see the power plants break ground in a matter of months.

(continued)

September Community Calendar

September 1, 2011

- 09/05 – Offices closed for Labor Day
- 09/10 – Town of Gila Bend Auction (9:00am)
- 09/10 – Corine and Linda's Walk for Life (6:30am)
- 09/13 - Council Meeting – Regular Meeting(6:00pm)
- 09/24 – Punt, Pass & Kick
- 09/27 – Council Meeting - Regular Meeting (6:00pm)
- 10/08 – Pitch-In for Gila Bend (8:00am)



Auction Date Set

August 27, 2011

The Town will be holding a public auction on September 10th at Well #4. The gates will open at 9:00am for previewing of auction items. The auction will begin at 10:00am. There are more than 50 lots to be auctioned, including 17 vehicles.



Pitch In for Gila Bend

The 16th Annual Pitch-In for Gila Bend is scheduled for Saturday, October 8th from 8am – 2pm. Each year a drawing is chosen from entries that best depicts the clean-up theme. The theme for this year is "KEEP IT CLEAN – GO GREEN!" A cash prize of \$30 is given to the winner.



The CAP office is accepting donations of food, paper goods, tools, cash for T-Shirts, and more. Contributors of \$500 cash or more will have their name on the T-Shirts/Bags. Volunteers and team leaders are needed. Please contact Diane Dempsey at 928-683-2244 if you would like to contribute or participate.

and Linda's Walk for Life

August 29, 2011

The 5th Annual Walk for Life in memory of Corine and Linda is scheduled for September 10th at 6:30am with registration starting at 6:00am. The walk will start at the Gila Bend Primary Care Center.



For those wanting a T-shirt, the cost is \$20/person 14 years and older with funds benefitting the NAU/Yuma Corine Turner & Linda Davis Nursing Scholarship. Questions should be directed to Carrie Turner-Utz at walkforcorineandlinda@yahoo.com and on Facebook.

Town of Gila Bend - 644 West Pima Street - Gila Bend, AZ - 85337 www.gilabendaz.org

Solar-power plants booming continued

Eric Fitzer, planning and economic-development director for Gila Bend, said town leaders were asked to make zoning changes by the property owner who owned the land where Paloma and Cotton Center are being built.

The land already was rezoned once for housing, but the landowner suddenly was getting calls from solar companies, and going through the entire rezoning process would have cost a significant amount of time and money, Fitzer said.

"We wanted to incentivize it and help nurture the industry," he said.

The "overlay" zone was added to the town master plan. A solar-power plant of 100 acres in size or with vacant land to expand, and which can begin construction in a year, can quickly be developed, he said, so long as it meets basic guidelines.

"Gila Bend does not have a lot of economic-development incentives," he said. "So what we are doing is fast-tracking. First Solar went in seven weeks from conception to construction."

He said the local spending by construction workers was "exactly what we were looking for when we enacted the strategy."

But once the construction jobs are gone, the power plants will not need many people to run them. Solana expects to employ about 85 people to run its massive plant, but the smaller projects will need just a few, mostly for security. Gila Bend is looking to attract technology or manufacturing companies that want to be located in an area ripe with solar-power plants, hoping to create more permanent jobs.

"We've started going after marketing our green electrons," Fitzer said, adding that town officials are working with Arizona State University to target companies that might bring operations to Gila Bend.

He said many businesses now focus on a "triple-bottom line" of profits, people and the planet.

THIS IS AN EXCERPT ONLY. THE FULL ARTICLE CAN BE READ ONLINE AT THE FOLLOWING LINK

Retrieved August 29, 2011 from the world wide web at

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/business/articles/2011/08/28/20110828gila-bend-solar-power-plants.html>

Town and CAP Offices Closed for Labor Day

Labor Day

Town offices will be closed Monday, September 5, 2011 in observance of Labor Day. Both the CAP and Town offices will be open at their regularly scheduled times on Tuesday, September 6th.

Have a safe and enjoyable Labor Day!