MI Officials Hope To Grow Solar Jobs

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THOMAS TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — On a farm field familiar with soybeans and corn, the hopes of Saginaw County's green industry could grow toward the sun.

The land behind an old farmhouse is where economic development officials hope solar industry jobs sprout in the future: Great Lakes Solar Technology Park, on a 240-acre greenfield in Thomas Township.

A mile away, officials hope Hemlock Semiconductor Corp., the world's biggest manufacturer of polycrystalline silicon, will attract more companies in the solar supply chain.

"The key to most of the issues that we face both from a social aspect and from an economic aspect are based on the need for jobs," said Thomas Township Manager Russell Taylor. "And our area needs jobs."

Construction on the $7.5 million solar park will start with a ceremonial groundbreaking Friday morning. New water and sewer lines, roads and lights will be built for a "shovel-ready" site.

Work should wrap up next summer, Taylor said.

The biggest hope: Solar panel maker Suniva of Norcross, Ga., will build a $250 million panel plant and hire 500 workers. With a $45 million, 15-year renaissance renewable energy zone to exempt most property taxes and an $8.6 million Michigan Economic Growth Authority tax credit on the table, leaders hope the incentives are enough. Another perk: The County Economic Development Authority will give land in the park to a company for $1 tied to a promise of investment and jobs, said Steve Jonas, Saginaw Future executive vice president.

Suniva produces high-efficiency monocrystalline silicon solar cells and modules.

Saginaw Future Inc. President and Chief Executive Officer JoAnn T. Crary has traveled from Beijing to Europe to sell the message of the Saginaw Valley as the Silicon Valley.

"We have presented this (park) to several companies that are considering a U.S. investment. None have committed at this time," she said.

The key targets are HSC customers in the solar supply chain.

Even as leaders try to kick-start the development, economic turmoil has buffeted the U.S. solar industry. Evergreen Solar Inc. in Midland has joined a list of solar manufacturers that closed shop and filed for bankruptcy. GlobalWatt announced a

500-job, $177 million solar module production plant in Saginaw when the project was announced two years ago. One car was in GlobalWatt's parking lot last week, an intercom at the front door didn't appear to be connected and a sign on the window said it was not currently accepting applications.

California solar maker Solyndra's bankruptcy and layoff of 1,100 workers after the company received a $528 million federal loan has led to a U.S. government inquiry, and seven U.S. solar companies have filed complaints with the U.S. Department of Commerce and the International Trade Commission against unfair trade competition from China.

U.S. manufacturers complain solar panel prices have plummeted since China began massive exports.

"We've really made a lot of headway going mainstream," said Ben Santarris, a Solar World Industries America spokesman in Hillsboro, Ore. "The problem that we're having is illegal trade from China that is threatening to wipe out the domestic industry."

Still, the domestic market has expanded by double-digit rates in recent years, despite China exporting 95 percent of what it produces, officials said.

Crary stays optimistic.

"The U.S. solar market is seen as the next growing market by solar companies," she said.

HSC, which has had multibillion-dollar expansions in Thomas Township, and Suniva are key exporters, Crary said.

"Those are two really important companies not only to this region, but to this country because they are exporting overseas," Crary said.

U.S. polycrystalline exports totaled $2.5 billion last year, which helped give the American solar industry a net trade surplus of $1.9 billion and a positive trade balance with China of $247 million, according to Michigan Great Lakes Bay Solar Advantage data.

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