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State transportation officials vow better communication in wake of contentious interstate solar project in Augusta

Augusta city councilors say they weren't informed of the state's plans to install 8,000 solar modules on 15 acres of land at interstate exits in Augusta, but state officials say they would have been willing to hold a public hearing if there had been interest.

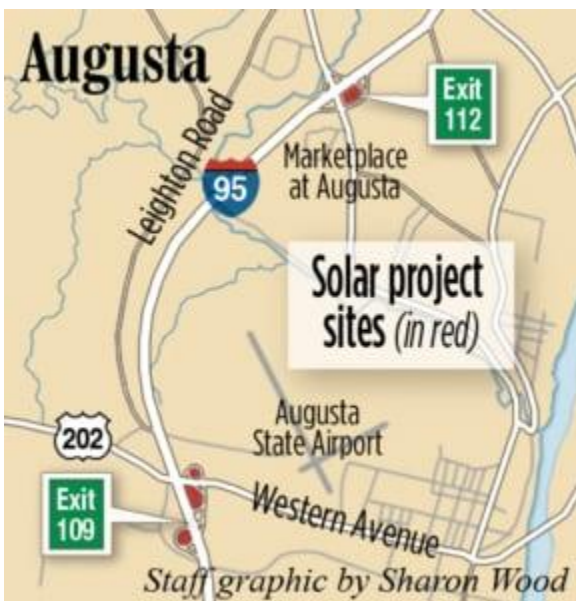


By [Keith Edwards](#) Kennebec Journal 12/07/2022 [View article here:](#)



Solar panels inside the Interstate 95 Exit 109 on-ramp are seen from Western Avenue on Tuesday in Augusta. *Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal*
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AUGUSTA — Some city councilors continue to be critical of an ongoing [state project to install solar arrays at two Interstate 95 interchanges](#) because it never underwent local scrutiny before construction began.



However, the state Department of Transportation's deputy commissioner said the 8,000 solar modules spread over 15 acres of the Interstate 95 rights-of-way at Exits 109 and 112 in Augusta will save state taxpayers more than \$3.3 million over the next 20 years. State officials also say the solar panels will occupy land that would otherwise be unused and said they were in touch with city staff about the state's plans in 2020 and would have held a public hearing if they thought there was interest in one.

As construction of the [controversial project](#) continues, Nina Fisher, deputy commissioner of the state transportation department, and Dave Gardner, the agency's environmental director, gave a presentation and took questions — and a bit of verbal heat — last week from city councilors. They expressed concerns with the aesthetics of the solar infrastructure project that officials expect to generate almost 6 million kilowatt hours of renewable clean energy a year.

The project did not undergo any review by the city's Planning Board because state officials said projects within the right-of-way of the federal transportation system do not require approval from the municipalities interstates pass through. That didn't sit well with some city councilors, who said they've been contacted by numerous constituents who feel the under-construction systems are ugly and don't give a good first impression to people coming into the state capital on its main gateways.

"There have been several solar projects in Augusta and every one of them, except for this one, has gone through a vetting process before our Planning Board," said Ward 3 Councilor Mike Michaud. "I, like other councilors, have received a lot of pushback to this. This project is already a done deal, there's nothing that can be done about it. But I would make a suggestion that in the future, if you're going to a community and putting these solar arrays in, to be much more transparent than you have been in this."

Fisher said state transportation department officials informed the city about plans for the project, as well as [a smaller solar array at the state-owned, city-run Augusta State Airport](#), in 2020. A letter dated June 5, 2020, from state transportation officials to then-City Manager William Bridgeo, said the state was seeking requests for proposals from developers for the interstate solar sites and suggested a copy of the letter be provided to all municipal officials, employees and boards with responsibilities for utility and/or land-use planning and permitting. The letter said the state did not plan to have a public meeting regarding the proposal.

But Fisher told city councilors last week if the city wanted there to be a public hearing on the proposal, the state would have been willing to hold one.

“We were working with city staff on this since 2020,” she said. “As far as a briefing, when you asked (the DOT to come discuss the project), we came, and we will always do that.”



Construction work continues Tuesday on solar panels off Exit 109 of Interstate 95 in Augusta.
Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal
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At-Large City Councilor Courtney Gary-Allen, elected in November 2020, said the first time the current council learned about the project was when they saw it being built.

Current City Manager Susan Robertson said when city officials got the 2020 letter the city had just that week reopened its offices after they were shut down due to the pandemic. She said the state made it clear at the time the project did not require review under the city’s land use rules because it was within the federal interstate system right-of-way.

Fisher, as the discussion with councilors wound down, said the solar installation on the interstate was a first of its kind for Maine. Fisher said the state learned from this project and would take the feedback it got from Augusta officials to heart.

Asked to clarify whether that means the state would engage in a more public process on similar projects within interstate rights-of-way, Fisher wrote by email Tuesday: “The Maine Department of Transportation manages a vast, multimodal transportation system that stretches from Kittery to Madawaska. Part of our job is to communicate proactively with our customers — the people who live, work, and travel in Maine. While we maintain that this project represents a win-win for Maine because it uses otherwise unusable state land to produce clean, renewable energy to power

state office buildings, we understand our proactive communication about why we did this should have been better.”



Construction work continues Tuesday on solar panels off Exit 109 of Interstate 95 in Augusta. *Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal*
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The state contracted with Cenergy Power, a California-based company selected in a competitive bid process, to build, run and maintain the solar arrays for the next 20 years. The electricity being produced will be fed into the Central Maine Power Co. grid and the state will receive a credit on electric bills for part of the state capitol complex in Augusta, which is expected to save \$3.3 million over the two decades.

The sites at both exits are expected to be up and running by July 2023, according to Gardner, the transportation department’s environmental director.

The state did make one change to the project after the outcry from Augusta officials and residents. A planned chain-link fence will be changed to a black poly-coated fencing at the request of the city. Fisher said that change will cost the state about \$40,000, because it was added after the contract with the project developer had been completed. The developer is paying all other costs of the development and operations of the array.