

Solar panels begin taking ground at Hamilton trucking depot site



By [Erin Duffy/The Times of Trenton](#)

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HAMILTON — Nexus Energy LLC submitted plans for a new solar project off Whitehead Road in late 2011 just as the township council was fine-tuning a new solar ordinance imposing strict rules on what kinds of solar projects could be installed where in the township.

But Bill Harris, president of the solar firm, didn't sweat it.

"This is a perfect example of not only what the township wants, but what the governor's master plan calls for," Harris said. "It's ground-mounted solar, not taking up good farmland or being in residential areas."

Construction on the solar site, located off a Pitt Ohio trucking depot in an industrial-zoned area on Whitehead Road, started this month.

The first of what will become 1,100 solar panels are scheduled to be installed by the first week of February.

It is one of the only large-scale sites to come before the township since the new solar ordinance was passed in December 2011, prompted in part by several large, ground-mounted solar site applications that came before the zoning board and ignited fierce debate on the proper place for solar installations.

Rich Williams, the township's director of community planning and compliance, said the number of solar applications submitted to the township has dropped since council passed an ordinance giving preference to solar projects on rooftops, parking garages and industrial sites, and making it harder to install panels on farmland, residential or rural areas.

"We've had a few people that would come in to talk to us," he said. "I know of one, they asked what our thoughts would be and we explained to them this is what our ordinance allows, this is what has been approved or not approved so far, and they didn't come back."

Residential solar projects — panels thrown up on rooftops or sheds to decrease electric bills or power households — don't typically require an application to the township beyond obtaining an electrical permit and permission from a construction official, Williams said.

One resident came before the zoning board in April seeking approvals to install ground-mounted panels outside his house to help out with his bills, but the zoning board rejected the request, saying panels in residential neighborhoods belonged on roofs. No other residents have applied to the township since for ground-mounted arrays, according to Williams.

Harris said Nexus didn't run into any problems with the township or its new ordinance. While it's project is ground-mounted, not up on a rooftop or parking garage, it's located in an industrial park where Pitt Ohio, the Nexus client commissioning the solar installation, runs a warehouse. The panels, placed on a half-acre adjoining field, are expected to produce 285,000 kilowatt hours a year, enough to cover all of Pitt Ohio's electrical needs for its warehouse, Harris said.

"With this one, it's typical of what we do," Harris said. "We're not out there trying to build a giant solar farm. My drive is to make my client's electric bill go away."

Hamilton, like other townships Nexus Energy works with, is cracking down on panel visibility, requiring solar sites to be virtually invisible from roadways and nearby houses, Harris said.

"What we have found is in township we're going into, more and more townships are saying for commercial facilities you're not allowed to physically see the panels from the front of the property or up the street," he said. "We have had to adapt some of our designs."