FPL solar farm up and running-

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Article in the Lake City Reporter on Sunday, Feb. 3, 2019. Sorry no link provided.

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FPL solar farm up and running

As a bonus, will contribute big to local tax rolls.

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Columbia County's grid just got a whole lot greener. Florida Power and Light's local solar energy facility, FPL Sunshine Gateway Solar Energy Plant, began operations Thursday when FPL put four new solar energy plants across the state into operation. The FPL Sunshine Gateway Solar Energy Center is in northern Columbia County, near the Interstate-75 and

Interstate-10 interchange. The other three solar energy centers to go operational were: FPL Interstate Solar Energy Center, St. Lucie County; FPL Miami-Dade Solar Energy Center, MiamiDade County; and FPL Pioneer Trail Solar Energy Center, Volusia County.

The four plants combined will collectively save FPL customers about $40 million over 30 years, FPL said in July – about $10 million of which will be courtesy of the local facility. The bigger payday for locals, however, comes courtesy of property tax. The energy center is expected to generate between $1.2 million and $1.6 million in taxes, which would be distributed among the County Commission, City Council, School Board, Suwannee River Water Management District and Lake Shore Hospital Authority.

Each of the new plants is capable of generating 74.5 megawatts of power from the sun, for a combined addition of nearly 300 megawatts of new solar capacity. FPL now operates a total of 18 solar power plants and hundreds of other smaller solar installations, totaling around 1,250 megawatts of universal solar capacity across Florida. “It was an exciting day to add more of this clean energy to our fuel mix for the nearly 5 million customers that we serve across the state,” said Stephen Heiman, FPL spokesman. “It was a good day.”

Heiman said the local facility was rigorously tested before it was brought online to make sure everything was working properly. The farm has 330,000 solar panels and the 74.5 megawatts of renewable energy generated by the solar farm is reportedly enough energy to power 15,000 homes. Photovoltaic solar panels produce direct current when sunlight hits the panel’s solar cell. Direct current flows from the panels to an inverter that transform the energy into alternating current. Alternating current then helps power up homes and businesses.

On cloudy or rainy days and at night, homes and businesses are powered by some of the cleanest power in the country through FPL's highly fuel-efficient fleet of natural gas and zero-emissions nuclear power. "The addition of these new solar power plants is going to continue to allow us to bring even more clean energy at an affordable cost to our customers," Heiman said. Construction of the local solar plant was around $100 million, but Heiman said FPL financed it in a way that was cost-effective to customers. "Over the life of the project, savings from fuel and other generation-related expenses will not only pay for the initial investment to build the plant, but will provide millions of dollars in savings above and beyond that initial investment cost," he said.

"Ultimately there is no net cost for our customers for these projects." Heiman said using the sun as a fuel, rather than using another, costly fuel source, may also reflect savings in customers' bills. "As of today, there is an immediate decrease in the fuel portion of customers' bills due to these plants coming online," he said. "That will continue to provide savings for customers with the more energy we can generate using just the sun as that fuel source." He said there would be a small, short-term cost to customers, but over time that will decrease.

He estimated it at $0.25 per $100 power bill. Customers bills are made of the base rate, which is set by the Public Service Commission, and the other portion of the bill is the fuel costs. With the plants coming online, the fuel costs decrease. "We don't have to purchase a fuel source to power the solar power plants because we're using the sun's rays to provide that power, so because of that we're able to generate electricity without having to pay for a fuel source when we get it from these solar power plants,"

Heiman said. FPL serves more than 14,000 Columbia County

customers, who get energy through FPL's natural gas fleet, emissions-free nuclear fleet as well as other solar energy centers. "All of the power plants that we have feed our grid, which ultimately serves all of our 5 million customers throughout the state," Heiman said.

The solar power plant generated roughly 250 jobs in the area while it was being constructed. However, the solar power plants are completely unmanned. "We monitor them remotely from our renewable operations control center down in Juno Beach, which is where our headquarters is," he said. "However, there will on occasion be one or two folks on site maintaining the vegetation or the operations of the plant.

That is one of the nice things about these types of solar power plants is that they are unmanned." In 2018 FPL had eight solar plants go online and Florida became second to California in solar panel installations. And earlier last month, FPL announced its "30 by 30" goal of installing 30 million new solar panels at 100 new plants by 2030, which, if actualized, would make the Sunshine State a leader in solar-power generation.