Solar idea sunny for SUNY

Tesla cars founder eyes Buffalo for $1B market-shifting sun-panel plant
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Elon Musk, the enigmatic founder of the electric car manufacturer Tesla, has plans to build one of the world’s largest solar panel factories in Buffalo.

The plans for the massive factory — which would likely cost more than $1 billion to build — would further move the U.S. solar industry’s center of gravity toward upstate New York and the SUNY College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering in Albany away from its current home in Silicon Valley.

Musk is chairman and the largest individual shareholder of SolarCity, a solar panel installation firm based in San Mateo, Calif. On Monday, SolarCity agreed to buy another California solar company, Silevo, for $350 million.

Silevo may not be a household name in the Capital Region, but back in November Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that he had brokered a deal with Silevo to build a solar panel factory in Buffalo as part of a $1.6 billion high-tech development project involving the NanoCollege that includes $225 million in state subsidies.

In regulatory documents filed Tuesday, SolarCity says its going forward with the previous plans for a factory in Buffalo, but one that will be much larger than the one planned by Silevo, which has its only factory now in China.

According to state documents, Silevo had agreed to build a $750 million factory that would produce about 200 megawatts of solar panels a year, enough to power about 50,000 homes.

However, SolarCity says it is in negotiations with the state to build a 1-gigawatt solar panel factory, which would make enough panels every year to power 220,000 homes — five times the output of the original factory. An updated price tag wasn't revealed.

To understand just how large a factory this would be, General Electric Co. was considering building a 400-megawatt solar factory a few years ago in Colorado that would have been the largest in the country at the time. GE later abandoned the plan.

"Today, a global leader in clean energy manufacturing announced potential plans to build one of the world's largest solar panel production plants at Buffalo's Riverbend site, where the abandoned Republic Steel Mill is being transformed..." Cuomo said in a statement issued Tuesday, without mentioning Musk's company.
SolarCity does not currently make its own solar cells, so acquiring Silevo is a huge leap into manufacturing and owning the technology. Silevo's solar cells, which are assembled into panels or modules, are a hybrid between traditional crystalline silicon cell and thin-film technologies.

The company is already entrenched in New York with regional operations centers in Albany, Westchester County and Long Island.

SolarCity, which lost $75 million during the first quarter of the year, was founded in 2006 by brothers Peter and Lyndon Rive, native South Africans who ran a company called Everdream that was sold to computer giant Dell in 2007. Musk is their cousin.

In an interview on Tuesday, Peter Rive said that the previous deal New York had with Silevo was not the driving factor in the acquisition. But he said he is excited to be working with the NanoCollege and its CEO, Alain Kaloyeros, and added the company is in talks with the school and the state to expand their relationship.

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