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## Off the grid in Lockport: 500 net-zero energy homes planned



Photo by Hawthorne Development

A rendering of the proposed net-zero development in southwest suburban Lockport.

By DENNIS RODKIN

A developer is planning a spring start for a development that would generate all the power needed for its 500 homes, as well as businesses, using solar power and geothermal systems.

Dr. Ganesan Visvabharathy, CEO of Hawthorne Development in Burr Ridge, is finishing the proposal he will submit to Lockport officials for Serenity Landing, to be built on a 189-acre site that he bought out of foreclosure when a previous subdivision failed.

Visvabharathy's project would have a total of about 500 houses, townhouses, condominiums and senior apartments. Its energy needs would be met via solar panels atop virtually every structure, and geothermal pumps that circulate water below ground to capture the naturally steady temperature there and use it in heating or cooling air, depending on the season. Energy-tight construction will contribute, as well.

In all, the energy generated on site would equal what the residents and businesses consume, or "net zero." Energy brought in for cooking, for example, would be offset by the excess solar power generated.

"Net zero matters not just to me, but to the entire country, and the world," Dr. Vish, as he prefers to be called, wrote in an email to Crain's. "If we are able to produce all the energy needed for a project at the site itself, then it is a mark of independence, and non-dependence on the grid."

The development may be the largest net zero housing plan in the Chicago area, according to Crain's research. Next largest was a 132-home development in New Lenox that was announced in 2010 but changed directions under a different builder.

Dr. Vish also owns Solar Micronics, a Burr Ridge solar installation company whose completed projects include installation of 960 solar panels on a cancer treatment center in Morris. According to Solar Micronics' website, the installation meets all the facility's electrical demand at an annual cost saving of \$66,000.

That installation is about the size that 50 residential units would need.

A net-zero home, Dr. Vish emailed, is "highly cost-saving to the consumer," particularly when built at the scale of a full community, which reduces initial installation costs.

His proposal does not include asking prices or rents on the homes to be built at Serenity Landing.

Ben Benson, Lockport's city administrator, said officials in the Will County town of 25,000 "are excited to work with (Dr. Vish) on what he's proposing. A net-zero development would be the only one in Will County or all of Chicago at that size, and we're happy to be a trend-setter."

Dr. Vish said he will submit his proposal for a planned-unit development soon, and Benson said he foresees few objections, as the site, at Bruce and Farrell roads, already was zoned for roughly the same density, but with conventional construction and energy infrastructure.

The Serenity Landing plan is the biggest development on the boards in Lockport "by far," Benson said. The town also has two rental developments totaling 480 new apartments under consideration for 2018 starts, as well as a development of about 300 of houses and townhouses by M/I Homes that has shown strong enough sales that M/I is now looking to buy a second parcel and build more. Another developer will soon roll out a 31-townhome project.

A recent study for the town by Schaumburg-based home building analysts Tracy Cross & Associates indicated that "we can absorb these" homes as the suburb continues to grow, Benson said. Industrial tenants have contracted for about 6 million square feet in the past three years, he said, and jobs in those spaces should add to the town's already swift population growth.

The size of Serenity Landing "allows us to experiment with different segments of the population such as seniors, working adults, etc. to see their appetite for net zero and green (construction)," Dr. Vish wrote. "We have the ability to provide different product types such as senior housing, apartments for working adults, single-family homes for sale, medical office buildings, commercial or retail. So if one segment is less receptive, then we can focus on the rest."

Crain's could not determine what Dr. Vish's firm paid for the Lockport land. His press release said the total development cost is about \$200 million. The timeline for completion is not yet set.

For a similar project on 50 acres in downstate Mt. Vernon, 275 miles from Chicago, Dr. Vish has received the needed approvals and expects to start construction in early 2018. In North Carolina, work is underway on Dr. Vish's project to convert a former textile mill in Bessemer City into a net-zero apartment building with 175 units.

Dr. Vish's experience in conventional residential development includes conversion of a vintage South Michigan Avenue office building into loft condos and an apartments-to-condos conversion in Broadview.

Along with outfitting the three net-zero housing projects for market-rate buyers and renters, Solar Micronics is developing plans to make solar power available to residents of low-income housing projects. "We hope to make solar affordable to all," he wrote.

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