

Creating a New Story in Lubicon Land

Image



Site of infamous 2011 oil spill now a renewable energy waypoint

On another brilliantly sunny day in the northern Alberta hamlet of Little Buffalo, history was being made earlier this week. The home to about 500 people was abuzz with a kind of activity not seen there before – the installation of a brand-new 20.8-kilowatt solar panel system.

Melina Laboucan-Massimo, who is from Little Buffalo, described the scene at one point. “We have the (solar) panels on the ground; we’re just going to be putting them up with the racking system today. We’re really excited about it,” she said.

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*The Piitapan Solar Project
installation in process this week.*

The new solar-panel system is a pole-mount model, meaning the panels sit atop a pole looming about 15 feet into the air.

Electricians, solar contractors and community members are on-hand all week to complete the installation and/or train, learn and observe.

The goal is to have the system, called the Piitapan (Cree for Sunrise) Solar Project, installed by Aug. 21.

This will be followed by a Solar Feast this weekend, in which all generations of the hamlet will have an opportunity both learn more about what this new feature to their place means, as well as celebrate its installation as a truly historic moment.

For Melina, a member of the Lubicon Cree First Nation, seeing the solar-panel system take shape has special meaning. She was born in Little Buffalo, which is encircled by oil and gas development and large scale industry. Little Buffalo is part of the Lubicon Lake Nation.

“As a child growing up in Northern Alberta, I saw the beauty and vastness and pristineness of this land and where I come from,” says Melina.

Her awareness of how much of that beauty was being fragmented and destroyed grew as the effects of the oil and gas development took hold. Melina’s understanding of those effects deepened as she pursued a Masters environmental study in tarsands extraction.

Then in 2011, 4.5 million litres of oil was spilled from a nearby damaged pipeline. The negative effects on the local environment and the health of the people of Little Buffalo gave devastating shape to the realities of being an “oilsands” community.

Melina went on to document those effects in this photo essay.

The essay was intended to be a rallying cry for people to advocate for more government policies that promote green rather than extractive energy resources.

Since that time, however, Melina has not been sitting around, waiting government or “the industry” to act. “I’ve been wanting to have solar go up in a tarsands-impacted community like Little Buffalo for about two and a half years now,” says Melina, who is currently completing a Masters degree in indigenous governance with a focus on renewable energy in First Nations communities at the University of Victoria.

At a community meeting last summer, Melina and W Dusk Energy Group president David Isaac outlined their hopes for a solar project for Little Buffalo. They garnered strong community backing, including from the Chief and Council.

The two have since worked tirelessly to fundraise for the project. They were happy to have Bullfrog Power, Honour the Earth Foundation and actress and environmental activist Jane Fonda all donate to the project.

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The Piitapan Solar Project is a solar photovoltaic system (with micro-inverters), interconnected to the local health facility through Alberta’s Micro-Generator program (bidirectional cumulative metering).

As the solar panel system whirs into production this week, Melina envisions the young people of her community both getting excited about what it can produce but also seeing new employment possibilities that don't harm the land.

She points to stats from countries like Germany where 400,000 renewable energy jobs have been purported to have been created. She wants her peers to see that there are jobs for them in the future in a non-extractive industry, that will have more sustainable benefits to a community like theirs.

This new solar-panel system can shine like a beacon, showing that "this is the way of the future," she says.

While the intent is to use the initial solar-panel system as a partial power source, education tool and demonstration project, future aspirations include the installation of a larger system that could power the entire hamlet. (Though grid connected, Little Buffalo currently relies on a combination of propane.)

There's even the possibility of generating revenues for the community through other and/or larger solar panel systems. "This is first and foremost about energy sovereignty," Melina says. "But it could also offer a sustainable way of generating revenue for communities, instead of having to generate revenue through destructive resource extraction."

The Piitapan Solar Project is community owned and operated. The system will be connected to the Little Buffalo health facility through Alberta's Micro-Generator program. The project team plans to carry out training and workshops to implement a local solar electric system installer-training program, to build local capacity and ensure participation. At the elementary and high school level, workshops and lessons will be designed to engage the students on the benefits of renewable energy production.

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