

TAKEPART FEATURES


Thanks to Solar, This Steel City Is Turning Into a Clean Energy Powerhouse

(Photo: Buffalo News/Facebook)

TAKE ACTION

Lackawanna, N.Y., used to be home to polluting smokestacks, but a new initiative is putting the former factory town on an environmentally

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At the turn of the 20th century, the city of Lackawanna, in Western New York, was home to one of the largest steel companies in the world. The Lackawanna Steel Company, later purchased by the Bethlehem Steel Company, gave the small city its name. For decades the plant pumped pollution into the environment, expelling **benzene emissions** into the air and contaminating the water.



But if this 150-year-old town was once recognizable for the smokestacks that billowed above the factory, it's changing that image.

The plot of land where the Lackawanna Steel plant once stood is now home to one of the largest wind energy farms in the world. It's also the future site of Lackawanna's Steel Sun project, a solar farm that hopes to accommodate 13,000 **solar panels**.

The Steel Sun initiative is part of a larger campaign called "**About Face**," which is headed by the city's new director of development, Fred Heinle. When Heinle took the job five months ago, the Steel Sun project was the first thing on his desk, and he immediately got to work making it happen.

"The Bethlehem Steel site is about a twelve-hundred-acre parcel of land that's in various stages of contamination and mediation and any other '-ation' you can think of," Heinle says. "We're trying to rebuild the community."

The "About Face" campaign is about completely changing the image of Lackawanna, which has long been defined by its history as a major steel-producing city. When the plant shut down in the mid-1980s, it left 20,000 people jobless. It also left behind a contaminated environment. The Environmental Protection Agency declared the area a Superfund site in 1988.

Bill Nowak, who is part of the Sierra Club's Energy Committee for New York, worked at the plant as a college student. "It polluted a couple miles along the Buffalo waterfront and kind of left it a desolate wasteland when the plant closed," he says.

In 2007, thirty acres of the former Bethlehem Steel site were annexed and used as the location for the Steel Winds project, an initiative that built 15 wind turbines on the plant's plot of land. The Steel Sun project will appropriate another 24 acres of that former steel factory site.

By November 2014, the new solar farm is expected to produce enough electricity for 1,600 single-family homes.

"Across our old waterfront on the lake, these windmills that you see from everywhere—they are who we are today," says Heinle. "The solar panels are less visible, but just the idea that those 13,000 solar panels [exist] on one of the most highly polluting business activity centers of the last century is a dramatic change of direction for any municipality."

Nowak says the solar farm is a positive development for the city, but more initiatives like it need to be undertaken.

"If we're going to win the battle of **climate change**, we're going to need all three legs of the renewable energy stool—we need wind energy and geothermal as well," Nowak says.

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