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## Sun and suds

May 20, 2016 | JEAN GRUSS | EDITOR/LEE-COLLIER

To quench the thirst of a fast-growing population, beer distributor J.J. Taylor Cos. is building a warehouse and distribution facility that will be the size of three football fields.

But the building will be noteworthy for something other than the 7.5 million cases of beer J.J. Taylor will be distributing across South Florida from the new building in Fort Myers.

To chill all that beer, the company has contracted with Solar Energy Management of Tampa to build the largest solar rooftop array of its kind in Florida. "What Florida has is big roofs," says Scott McIntyre, the CEO of Solar Energy Management who is working with Edwards Construction of Ocala to build the distribution center.

Jose Rivera, the corporate vice president of administration for J.J. Taylor Cos. who crunched the numbers, says a number of factors convinced him this was a good investment. These include improvements in the reliability of the technology, a federal tax credit and the likelihood that electric rates will continue to rise.

Already, J.J. Taylor uses natural gas to fuel the company's delivery trucks, a move that saved the company money when oil prices spiked. "We've been looking at natural gas and

solar for a long, long time," Rivera says. "A lot of things have changed."

Rivera estimates the return on investment on the new building will be six-and-a-half years. Although he declines to cite the price tag for the solar roof on the \$25 million expansion, he says the power bill would be \$250,000 annually without solar, not counting utility rate increases later.

Another plus is the 30% federal tax credit and accelerated depreciation that the company can claim. Without the credit, Rivera estimated it would have taken nine to 10 years to break even on the investment. "That tax credit is significant for us," says Rivera. "We were right there on the fence."

What's more, the solar panels and the inverters that convert the energy into power have a 25-year warranty, reassuring Rivera that the expensive equipment won't have to be replaced every few years. "This is going to be here for a while," he smiles.

Obtaining bank financing for the construction of the building wasn't more difficult with the solar roof than without it. Rivera says the beer distribution business is growing as people continue to move to Florida. "Banks love cash flow," Rivera says, noting Northern Trust financed the expansion. "Our business is recession resistant."

While solar power will contribute 90% of the new building's power, it will still be tied into the public utility grid. That's because it can send excess power it generates during sunny days, earning a credit it can use during overcast days or at night. Plus, if the building needs outside power it can get it.

Battery technology promises future savings as the company could store excess power. "That's a game changer," Rivera says.

Rivera says there are less tangible benefits, too. The company earns goodwill from customers and employees for investing in renewable fuels. For example, the natural gas powered trucks are quieter, something both customers and employees appreciate.

**Scott McIntyre, CEO of Solar Energy Management, left, and Jose Rivera, corporate vice president of administration with J.J. Taylor Cos., are overseeing the construction of the largest commercial rooftop solar array in Florida. Photo by Ed Clement**

