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LOCALNEWS

Project brings solar power to school

Published: Wednesday, February 06, 2008

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By Jim Kasuba, The News-Herald

WYANDOTTE — The short daylight hours and cloudy skies of winter lead many people to believe solar power isn't feasible in the Midwest.

However, those with expertise in renewable energy contend it shouldn't be written off so quickly.

City and school officials in Wyandotte are expressing excitement over their involvement in a pilot program that soon will bring solar power to Wilson Middle School.

Melanie McCoy, general manager of Wyandotte Municipal Services, said her department received a $50,000 grant from the state in August, but had to keep it under wraps until all the details could be ironed out.

The matching grant will go toward the design, installation, operation and maintenance of a 10-kilowatt photovoltaic system on the roof.

Photovoltaics is a technology in which light is converted into electrical power. It's best known as a method for generating power by using solar cells packaged in photovoltaic modules, often electronically connected in multiples as photovoltaic arrays to convert energy from the sun into electricity.

In simple terms, photons from sunlight knock electrons into a higher state of energy, creating electricity.

While solar energy rarely powers an entire building, it can serve as a valuable supplement to coal and natural gas.

"It's not going to supply all of the power at the school, but it's a matter of offsetting some of its power needs," McCoy said. "Wyandotte Municipal is going to own it so that we can get experience with renewable energy."

McCoy said she became aware of the grant opportunity through Shepherd Advisors, an Ann Arbor-based consulting firm. Its Web site states that the firm has a keen interest in a broad range of technologies and products that are more effective, more efficient and better for the environment.

"They told us this seemed like a good fit, and they helped us write a proposal," McCoy said.

While the hopes and expectations in installing a system that utilizes a renewable energy source is that it ultimately will prove to be cost effective and better for the environment, the Wilson Middle School project has an added element.

"It's going to be a great educational tool," McCoy said. "The value is the experience that Wyandotte Municipal and the school district are going to get from this."

In fact, that's one of the grant requirements. This is known as a demonstration program that will be designed to educate Wilson students and the public.

"Once installed, the system will be able to be monitored via computer by students at Wilson Middle School, and the program will be integrated into the science curriculum," said Edward Campbell, the school district's director of operations.

Johnson Controls, a Milwaukee-based company that offers products and services that optimize energy use, will be working with the district to help integrate the project into the school's curriculum.

Campbell and McCoy have been invited by Michigan School Business Officials to take part in a Renewable Energy Resource panel discussion on March 8 at Lansing Community College.

As a pilot program, the grant states that another of its purposes is to evaluate the effectiveness of a photovoltaic generation resource that is utility-owned, but hosted on a third-party building. The goal is to determine the viability of similar projects throughout the city.

On Jan. 16, the city Municipal Service Commission awarded installation of the system to Kulick Enterprises Inc. of Wyandotte.

McCoy said her department feels fortunate to have landed this grant, especially since one already had been awarded to another entity in Wayne County. She said it's her understanding that the state likes to spread the grants through a broad geographic area.

According to Campbell, Wyandotte Public Schools has the distinction of being the first school district in the state to participate in this type of project.

In the first year, Wyandotte Municipal Services will pay the school district $1 to lease the school's roof. McCoy said after that, a financial agreement will be reached between her department and the district.

Because access to the roof is limited, the department is planning to install a camera so that students and residents can view it remotely.

Although considered a demonstration project, this isn't a novelty. Wyandotte Municipal Services is exploring various forms of renewable energy that it plans to permanently offer its customers, such as wind power coming off the Detroit River.

In her State of the State address last week, Gov. Jennifer Granholm repeated her call for the state to produce 10 percent of its electricity through renewable resources by 2015 and 25 percent by 2025.

McCoy said she is hoping that the system can be installed before the students break for summer recess.

Campbell said an ideal day to kick off the project would be Earth Day, which is April 22.

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