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Solar celebration

Earth Day is background to highlight new system at middle school

By Jim Kasuba, The News-Herald

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WYANDOTTE — The sun was shining brightly on the day the city and school district kicked off their first-ever solar energy project.

It was just as fitting that officials chose Earth Day to highlight the installation of a 10-kilowatt photovoltaic system on the roof of Wilson Middle School.

Melanie McCoy, general manager of Wyandotte Municipal Services, said her department received a \$50,000 Michigan Energy Office matching grant earlier this year for the design, installation, operation and maintenance of the renewable energy system.

She said Wyandotte Municipal Services was pleasantly surprised by an offer from Johnson Controls, a Milwaukee-based company working with the district to integrate the project into the school's curriculum.



Photo by E.L. Conley

Robert Kulick of Kulick Enterprises Inc. points to solar panels on the roof of Wilson Middle School in Wyandotte. The panels are part of a 10-kilowatt photovoltaic system that was unveiled on Earth Day.

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"Wyandotte Municipal planned on spending 50 percent of the cost of the grant, but Johnson Controls picked up a substantial amount of it," McCoy said.

Photovoltaics, or PV as it is sometimes referred to in the industry, is a technology in which light is converted into electrical power. In such a system, photons from sunlight knock electrons into a higher state of energy, creating electricity.

Such a system rarely generates enough power to fill the needs of a building the size of Wilson Middle School, but it can be used to supplement coal burning and natural gas.

The Wyandotte Municipal Service Commission awarded installation of the system to Kulick Enterprises Inc. of Wyandotte.

This hybrid energy conservation system will be a learning tool both for the energy providers at Wyandotte Municipal Services and students at the school.

The first 12 months will offer a learning curve that should provide data for future years, indicating how much the system can offset energy costs.

"For the first year, we are leasing the roof for \$1 so we can get an idea how much energy it produces," McCoy said. "We can then share the savings down the road so we can all benefit from it."

She envisions the city-owned Wyandotte Municipal Services and the school district entering a financial agreement after the first year of the solar PV system's operation.

McCoy speculates that the reason solar energy isn't used more extensively is because of the start-up costs and the time it takes to recoup those costs.

Because of that, McCoy said solar power is expensive on a per-kilowatt scale.

"Coal is 5 to 7 cents per kilowatt, wind (power) is 10 cents a kilowatt and solar is 23 cents a kilowatt," McCoy said. "This system cost \$100,000 and we think it's going to be \$2,000 per year (in energy savings). If we were paying this ourselves, it would take 50 years until we regained our investment."

McCoy said silicon in the solar panels is a major component that makes them so expensive. She said panels made without silicon would make them considerably less expensive.

However, in this case the state grant and financial support from Johnson Controls have made the system extremely affordable.

The up side to solar power is that it is a clean, renewable energy source that can offset electric bills, especially in smaller buildings such as houses.

"Solar is perfect for a house because you don't need 10 kilowatts," McCoy said. "There are also state and federal rebates available when you use solar (power)."

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During the past couple of years, the city has become a leader locally in its exploration of renewable energy sources. For the past year, Wyandotte Municipal Services has tested average wind speeds along the Detroit River and determined that the installation of wind turbines is feasible based on the data collected.

McCoy sees both wind and solar power as valuable adjuncts to nonrenewable energy.

"You need a little mix of all of them," she said. "The wind may not be blowing on hot summer days, but you've got the sun."

She said solar energy is particularly valuable during the summer because the hottest days are generally "peak energy load days," a time when businesses and residents crank up their air-conditioning units.

U.S. Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (D-13th District), who attended Tuesday's ceremony and spoke to the students and invited guests, praised the city for helping to create a "greener, stronger America."

"Earth Day gives our community and our country an opportunity to focus on the key challenges facing us in preserving our planet," she said. "I commend the city of Wyandotte for its focus on initiatives, such as the wind-energy project and the installation of these solar panels at Wilson Middle School that promote energy conservation and efficiency."

Wilson Principal Tom Kell said it was a great day for his school. He said the seventh- and eighth-grade orchestra provided music to start the program. Eighth-grade students Connie Lustig, Drew McWilliams and Emily Rader were recognized for their winning entries in an essay contest that focused on solar energy. The three students read their winning essays to the invited guests.

Additionally, members of the school's Science Club planted trees on the front lawn.

"I was surprised how much it meant to them," Kell said about his students' reaction to the tree plantings.

Although this is considered a pilot project, McCoy said the life expectancy of the solar panels is 20 years so she expects the system will be in place for at least that long.

The last component still to be installed will be a camera so that students and residents will be able to view the system remotely from their personal computers to see how much power it is generating at any particular time.



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