

Work begins on solar array at Vantage Career Center

Written by Kirk Dougal

Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:48 PM - Last Updated Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:55 PM

BY KIRK DOUGAL

DHI Correspondent

news@delphosherald.com



VAN WERT - The Beatles song, "Good Day Sunshine," will hold extra meaning at Vantage Career Center starting later this summer.

Superintendent Staci Kaufman told the Times Bulletin that final permits for the school's solar array were approved on May 31 and construction on the project began on June 3. She expects electricity to be produced for the school building by August 1. That sounds like a quick turnaround but in reality this project has been years in the planning.

"For the past three years we have been interested in solar power," Kaufman said. "Once we knew we would be providing alternative energy training for wind turbines, it made sense to add the solar aspect for the curriculum."

Work begins on solar array at Vantage Career Center

Written by Kirk Dougal

Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:48 PM - Last Updated Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:55 PM

The idea began three years ago with one company but Vantage later changed to Solar Planet as its partner on the project. Negotiations with Solar Planet were completed earlier this year and now the array construction is moving forward quickly thanks to good pre-planning. Two years ago when the Vantage grounds were already torn up for the recent building and renovation project, conduit was placed for the array. That thinking ahead means that all the below ground infrastructure was ready to go when the permits were completed. As a part of the agreement, Solar Planet will reimburse the school for the costs of the conduit installation.

Kaufman said the project is a one-megawatt array comprised of approximately 4,200 solar panels. This is larger than the originally planned three-quarter-megawatt production and when it is up and functioning fully on a clear day, it could provide up to 80 percent of Vantage's electricity requirements.

The system runs off a dual meter through AEP and the school will draw its electricity first from solar power before tapping into the grid. Much like the wind turbine agreements in Van Wert County, the school owns the land but Solar Planet is the owner of the array. The agreement spells out the costs of the electricity over the 25-year life of the contract and Kaufman said it will save the school money.

Many of the peak electricity producing days for the solar array do not fall within the school year for high school students but most of the adult programs at Vantage are conducted year-round. That does cut into the fiscal savings but does not take into consideration the main benefit of the solar array.

“(Solar) won't be a new program (at Vantage Career Center) but there will certainly be aspects of that worked into our existing programs,” Kaufman said. “Neither wind alone or solar training alone is enough to generate the demand to outweigh the costs of providing a new program. But we have found, as career tech has across Ohio, that the alternative energy field programs work best when linked to your building trades, your electricity, because the concepts are common across those trades. So you start with the basic core and then you add alternative energy as a component of that curriculum.” She pointed out that alternative energy theories and study is already a part of the science programs at Vantage. The array will keep the school at the forefront of training as only a handful of other school districts across Ohio provide the same opportunity.

Kaufman said it is hard to overstate how valuable a teaching tool the array will provide. Much of

Work begins on solar array at Vantage Career Center

Written by Kirk Dougal

Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:48 PM - Last Updated Sunday, June 16, 2013 11:55 PM

the readouts are Internet-based so students and teachers will be able to access the solar power grid to see in real time what is happening in the array. Solar Planet has also agreed to construct a green energy lab. Trade and science students will be able to access the lab for classroom experience. Kaufman said plans to make it available for field trips for nearby schools as well. The green energy lab should be completed next Fall.