

Tri-Central, Tipton schools adding solar fields

By Caele Pemberton Kokomo Tribune

Nov 29, 2017



IBEW local 873 electrician Brandon Hohenberger pulls wire for the solar panels being installed just north of Tri-Central schools on November 27, 2017. Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune
Tim Bath

SHARPSVILLE - The Tri-Central Community School Corp. is almost ready to produce its own energy, leading to cost savings and cleaner power for the district.

The school approved the solar project earlier this year and has been working on building the solar field for the past few months. Administrators expect to have the field up and running before Christmas, said Superintendent Dave Driggs.

Driggs said the district has been working on a solar project for more than a year. Earlier this year, the Indiana Senate passed a law affecting net metering, which has allowed companies and organizations to sell back excess energy to energy companies at a retail rate, meaning savings for companies and organizations that do produce excess energy.

With the new law, those hoping to take advantage of net metering for the next 30 years need to have projects online by the end of the year, so the Tri-Central district has been working with construction company EMCOR and energy company PSG to complete the project by the end of December. The school will be able to sell its excess energy back to Duke Energy at a retail rate for 30 years.

Tri-Central's solar field is located on a plot of land across the street to the north of the school. Driggs said the district used to own the land, and when it sold it, the contract included a clause allowing the school to buy it back within 10 years if needed.

Several other schools in the area have or are working on alternative energy projects. The Taylor Community School Corp. recently finished a solar field, and the Northwestern School Corp. has a wind turbine that produces a portion of the district's energy needs. The Eastern Howard School Corp. also is working to complete a solar project by the end of the year.

Driggs said Tri-Central decided to pursue solar instead of wind turbines because there has been strong opposition in Tipton County against wind turbines. He added it likely would have taken two turbines to produce enough power for the school. Solar, he said, made more sense.

The project is being paid for with an approximate \$2.5 million bond lease. The Tri-Central district taxpayers will not see an increase in their taxes for this project. Included in this project is \$300,000 to change all of the district's lightbulbs to LED lights, which are expected to help the district save additional money.

With utility costs rising consistently each year, Driggs said they expect to save money by the time the project is paid off after 20 years. The savings will feed back into the district's general fund.

“Being able to save on utility costs is one way we can find better uses of the money we’re allotted,” he said.

But even if energy costs do not rise over the next 20 years, he said the project will still be worth it for the district.

“We’re being green, teaching our students how to help the environment,” he said.

The project will also include kiosks throughout the school showing how much power is being generated by the solar panels. Driggs said the project will be used as a teaching tool throughout the schools.

The Tipton Community School Corp., the only other school district in Tipton County, recently announced its own solar project. The district, however, will not be able to take advantage of net metering because it works with the Indiana Municipalities Power Agency and is not eligible for net metering with that agency.

Kevin Emsweller, superintendent of the Tipton district, said not being able to take advantage of net metering will cut savings, but it still expects to save some money through the solar project, which will be housed near the school buildings. The district is working with the alternative energy contracting company, Johnson-Melloh Solutions.

Tipton’s project will cost approximately \$1.2 million in bond leasing, and will not raise taxes for those in the Tipton district. Emsweller said the district plans to have the project up and running sometime in the spring. He said the Tipton district also plans to use the solar project as a teaching tool.

The Tipton district replaced all of its lightbulbs to LED bulbs over the summer.