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Article published Dec 19, 2015

Solar farm will educate Vermont Tech students

By Gina Conn

Staff Writer

RANDOLPH CENTER — Vermont Technical College is going solar in hopes of creating a great learning opportunity in addition to saving money through renewable energy.

By mid-February, a 500-kilowatt solar farm will be installed at the school's campus. Amanda Chaulk, Vermont Tech's director of marketing and communications, said she anticipates about \$15,000 in annual savings as a result of the project, which will generate credit for power fed onto the grid through what's called net metering.

She said there is also a local tax benefit that comes by virtue of having no impact on municipal services.

"We are excited for the future to reduce our expenses generated through the net metering," said Chaulk. "It's a great financial incentive for the college as well as a great learning opportunity for the students."

She said the idea to take the campus in a solar direction began with Vermont's initiative to increase solar energy in the state and reduce dependence on fossil fuel.

Andrew Savage, chief strategy officer for AllEarth Renewables, a solar manufacturing company based in Williston, said it entered into a partnership with Vermont Tech on the project last year. AllEarth will cover expenses for building the solar farm, and the college will benefit through energy savings.

AllEarth submitted an application for the state Section 248 permit in August to the Public Service Board. He would not say how much the company will invest in the project. The company has since been working on site layout and design.

The Public Service Board granted approval last week.

Savage said the solar farm will be able to produce nearly 1 million

kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. He said the production will complement both the school's energy initiative and energy education on campus.

"There will be an on-campus real-world application of how solar energy can help power an institution," he said.

Chaulk said the school offers coursework on renewable energy and reducing carbon emissions, including a bachelor's degree program in renewable energy.

She said construction of the solar array will create a "living laboratory" for students to see how one is built.

"They can see the design process," said Chaulk. "It gives us more of a hands-on opportunity even in the design and build project. Once we have it up and running, it will just be another asset to the college for how we teach."

She said the experience can even make for some construction management experience for students.

Savage said a third of AllEarth Renewables employees have Vermont Tech degrees.

"Many of the folks that will be working on the production of the solar tracker and equipment have their degrees straight from Vermont Technical College," he said. "It's particularly exciting for a manufacturer like ours to be supplying solar energy to the VTC campus."

Virtually all institutions in Vermont, according to Savage, are at least exploring the option of going solar.

"Not only because there are fixed savings in this project but because of the educational component," he said. "You combine what Pope Francis had said about climate change with what happened with the climate agreement that was just reached in Paris. It's no longer institutional leaders that are using renewable energy. It's becoming the norm and the real norm of the future."

In September, the pope called for urgent action on climate change in a speech made at the White House. This month, 195 nations reached an agreement that will commit nearly every country to lowering climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions to help stave off the most drastic effects of climate change.

Savage said with solar comes job opportunities.

"Vermont has one of the highest solar jobs per capita (rates) in the nation. There's a lot of career opportunities in the industry, and to have

VTC of the forefront is a great partnership," he said.

gina.conn @timesargus.com
