

Washburn School commits to solar for '19

- By Hope McLeod, For the Ashland Daily Press
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The Washburn School District is committing to solar energy for both school campuses in 2019 with the hopes of having solar power the aquaponics lab shown here. (Photo by Hope McLeod)

WASHBURN — It's nearly impossible to trace the origins of the phrase, "If fishes were wishes..." But not so difficult to trace the origin of why on Dec. 11 the Washburn School Board voted 5-0 to move forward with plans to pursue solar energy in 2019. It all started with a fish-wish.

“Several years ago we went up to visit Bill Bailey,” explained District Administrator Thomas Wiatr a day after the vote. “We were talking about renewable sources of energy, and aquaponics in the day he ran a large commercial greenhouse powered by solar energy and wood gasification.”

This led to another discussion.

“We thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to build an aquaponics lab at the high school as a learning opportunity and power it with alternative energy?’” recounted Wiatr.

Kids could learn both how to grow food on water and how to raise fish for fertilizer and human consumption. Not too long afterwards, this fish-wish turned into an actual aquaponics lab. But the alternative energy piece remained in the polliwog stage until now.

Heading into 2019, the school has two energy initiatives, one of them tied to the sun.

“We want to drive down our energy costs by becoming more energy efficient and we want to capture renewable energy from the sun,” Wiatr said.

In other words, the district intends to cut back on energy use by replacing inefficient fixtures, pumps and motors, and have solar energy offset the cost for the rest.

Custodian Homer Moore has already started implementing many energy efficiency measures in the past few years, which will continue throughout 2019. He plans to replace the old windows in the DuPont building, antiquated pumps and motors, and swap out all 790 fluorescent light fixtures for LED. Wiatr estimates that through these efforts, plus the savings derived from solar energy, the district will save approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year.

A lot has happened since that visit to Bailey’s Greenhouse. For one, Bailey retired his greenhouse business. Now he volunteers as an alternative energy consultant through Cheq Bay Renewables, a non-profit renewable energy clearinghouse he, his wife Gayle Chatfield

and Amber Vadnais cofounded a few years ago. This group offers free services to help facilitate cost-reducing alternative energy projects in the community, such as the school's solar project. Bailey helped point the district in the sunniest direction, which included assistance with procuring some sizeable grant awards that were also accepted at the December meeting.

"The time is right," Wiatr said. "We have just under half the project funded through grant awards and the rest may be financed through school revenue, such as open enrollment."

The four grants accepted on Dec. 11 are: Two Renewable Energy Competitive Incentive Program grants through Wisconsin's Focus on Energy Program: one for \$55,313 to construct a 100kW solar installation at the elementary school, and another for \$48,676 to build one, possibly two, at the high school — one would power the aquaponics lab. The other two grants came from Solar for Good, a philanthropic agency in Madison that awarded \$40,000 (\$20,000 for each campus.)

"In September we also received an Energy Innovation Grant for \$50,335," Wiatr said.

In total, the school has \$194,000 in grant support.

"Our board was very courageous in taking the initial step forward to approve an alternative energy source that will be very beneficial to the school by cutting our energy costs up to 25 to 30 percent," said Wiatr.

School board President Colleen Trumper said the plan is good for the district by saving money; good for the environment by producing clean energy; and good for students as an educational tool, incorporating solar science into the curriculum through hands-on experience.

"This is a really good way for the district to be proactive, and be good role models for the community and our students," Trumper said.