

District 158 solar panels will be operational by spring



Solar panels are being installed at Huntley Community School District 158's Square Barn Road campus in Algonquin. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)



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Workers have begun installing solar panels on Huntley Community School District 158's campuses -- expected to be three of the largest installations at Illinois public schools.

The arrays are expected to be operational by spring, district spokesman Dan Armstrong said Thursday.

The district is partnering with California-based Forefront Power (<https://www.forefrontpower.com/customers/education/>) to install solar panels with 5.6 megawatts of photovoltaic capacity on roughly 20 acres across its campuses in Algonquin, Huntley and Lake in the Hills.

The ground-mounted installations are expected to save the district \$4.2 million over 20 years while offsetting 12.3 million pounds of carbon emissions, officials said.

District 158 currently pays roughly 11 cents per kilowatt-hour for electricity, and its yearly energy cost is more than \$1 million.

Forefront will design, permit, finance, install and maintain the solar installations for the 20-year term. The project is estimated to cost about \$8 million. District 158 would then pay for the electricity generated by the system at a lower price than its existing utility rate.

Officials anticipate between 10% and 30% in savings on energy costs drawing power from the solar installations.

Nationally, K-12 schools spend more than \$6 billion yearly on energy, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. And at least a quarter of that could be saved through smarter energy management, improvements to existing buildings and building smarter new schools, the agency reports.

Installations are underway at District 158's Square Barn Road and Reed Road campuses. Work hasn't yet begun at the Harmony Road campus housing Huntley High School.

Armstrong said ground-mounted arrays are preferable to rooftop installations, which are more complicated and require a lot of preparation work and more maintenance. The installations will be visible at all three campuses, but will not be obtrusive, he added.

"We worked with the villages and other entities on siting these in terms of maximum efficiency and also being good neighbors," Armstrong said. "We have land at each of our campuses that is suitable for this use, so we are putting it to good use. It was not really a concern of ours to try to hide these away from passersby or visitors to our campuses. We want

people to know we are leading this effort in environmental sustainability as well as fiscal responsibility."

Forefront offers free solar energy curriculum to partner school districts. Students can observe and analyze system production using a monitoring platform and lesson plans are based on Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards. The company provides guest speakers for classroom visits, assemblies, guided walk-throughs of installations and technical presentations.

District 158 also will be working with two other providers -- Schools Power (<http://www.schoolspower.com/>) and Legends of Learning (<https://www.legendsoflearning.com/>) -- to develop its solar energy curriculum.

Schools Power provides school districts and community colleges with a renewable energy curriculum package, while Legends of Learning offers a game-based learning platform, Armstrong said.