

FEATURED

Corvallis solar group making inroads

JAMES DAY Corvallis Gazette-Times
Aug 6, 2020



John Craig with Craig Electric & Construction in Eugene examines the solar installation Center for Children and Families. The 100-kilowatt array is part of the Solarize Corvallis

Solarize Corvallis keeps chipping away by installing solar panels across the southwest portion of the city.

The group, a partnership led by the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition and the Oregon Clean Power Cooperative, installed a 150 kilowatt array at the Corvallis School District offices in March.

On Wednesday the group wrapped up a 100 kilowatt project at the Old Mill Center for Children and Families, just a few blocks away.

Coming up, a 110 kilowatt install is set for the Benton County office building on nearby Southwest Research Way.

For Bettina Schempf, executive director of the Old Mill Center, the project took awhile.

“I first started thinking about it four or five years ago,” she said in an interview conducted while electrician John Craig did the finishing work on the 272 rooftop panels. “But the funding just wasn’t there.”

Then, Schempf attended a quarterly meeting of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition where the Solarize Corvallis program was discussed.

The spark was lit and the sustainability group, the Old Mill and the power cooperative started talking. Ultimately, Schempf put in \$70,000 from the center's endowment, \$52,000 came from community donations, \$30,000 came from a state grant, and \$20,000 from the Energy Trust of Oregon finished off the \$172,000 project.

Each deal is different as different partnerships come together for each individual project. The \$297,000 school district array included \$120,000 from the school district plus funds from community investors and community donors. The \$173,000 Benton County installation features \$60,000 in county funds as well as community participation.

The community engagement comes with a payoff, too. Participants can get into the pool for \$1,000, said Dan Orzech of the Oregon Clean Power Cooperative, with the average investor adding \$5,000. The funds are invested for a 10-year term, with annual principal and interest checks distributed to the investors.

Currently investors are seeing 4% returns, although future returns cannot be guaranteed.

“There aren't many ways people can invest in their community and get a return,” Orzech said. “This gives them that opportunity. It gives everyday folks a change to get involved.”

Annette Mills, facilitator of the sustainability coalition, agreed.

“I kept hearing from a lot of people who said I really want to help, but I don’t know what to do,’ ” she said.

But she found the interest definitely was there. At a September fundraising event at the Castor restaurant the 20 to 25 people on hand pitched in with \$80,000 for the school district array.

The same interest bubbled up with the Old Mill project, where major donors included the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition, Starker Forests, G. Christianson Construction, Corvallis Radiology, EnergyWise Lighting of Albany and Dick and Doris Waring.

In addition to dividends for investors Schempf is expecting a return on her \$70K. The complex will essentially be energy independent, saving the nonprofit the \$6,000 to \$9,000 it has been paying annually in utility bills.

Also, applying the more than 270 solar panels effectively adds another layer of insulation to the building, lowering the need for heat or air-conditioning.

“A big part of our interest,” Mills said, “is helping organizations like the Old Mill save money. That’s very important.”