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Del Oro High will get big solar energy installation to save utility costs

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Loomis' Del Oro High School will tap into the power of the sun this summer by installing what may be the largest solar system for a Northern California school.

The school project – covering nearly 50,000 square feet of roof space – will produce 450 kilowatts of solar energy, enough to provide about 40 percent of Del Oro's energy use.

Pacific Power Management in Auburn will install, operate and own the solar photovoltaic panels. The Placer Union High School District, which includes Del Oro, will purchase electricity from the solar company at a fixed rate under a 20-year contract.

The agreement gives the school district the option to acquire the solar panels at market value after 10 years. In the meantime, the district will save up to 4 cents per kilowatt, for an annual savings of about \$40,000 a year, Superintendent Bart O'Brien said.

The district's estimated electricity budget for the 2008-09 school year is \$287,000.

"Many of the science teachers are excited about the possibilities of having a solar system in place to allow students to have a very tangible example of how the solar panels work," O'Brien said.

School officials also are basking in the excitement of another possible distinction.

"This will be the largest solar system installed at a school in the Sacramento region and probably for a school in any Northern California county," said Chris Schuring, director of sales for Pacific Power Management, a full-service commercial solar provider with a national clientele.

Schuring said many schools with smaller solar systems are sprinkled throughout the state, particularly in sunny Santa Clara County, but he is not aware of any as massive as the one proposed for Del Oro High School.

Construction of Del Oro's new solar system could begin later this month. The California Division of State Architects is reviewing the project for safety and other issues before giving final approval, Schuring said.

In the past, school districts were able to secure solar energy with help from the state. The California Energy Commission in 2004 launched the now-closed Solar Schools Program,

which provided \$4.5 million to 31 California schools to purchase and install solar systems.

By the end of 2006, about 700 kilowatts of solar-powered electricity was generated by the 31 schools, all within the service areas of Pacific Gas and Electric, Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric, according to commission's Web site. The program, offered a one-time rebate incentive of \$6.40 per watt to public and charter schools meeting eligibility requirements.

School districts statewide now are starting to leverage the expense of installing significant solar systems by contracting with private companies eligible for state rebates and tax credits.

Honeywell International Inc., a technology and manufacturing company, partnered last year with Pleasanton Unified School District to install, own and maintain solar panels on several district buildings. Honeywell reports being among the first contractors to operate as a utility for a K-12 school district by helping to supply 20 percent of the district's electricity and save an estimated \$2.5 million in energy costs.

Schuring said clients of Pacific Power Management are mostly large industrial and commercial companies, but he has seen a slight shift within the past 10 months.

"The company has received a large amount of school districts inquiring about and desiring solar systems because they are being affected by the rise in utility costs like the rest of us," Schuring said.

Within the past week, he has received about 10 proposals from universities and school districts seeking solar systems, including a proposal from the Los Angeles Unified School District, the state's largest school.

Jennifer Zerwer, a spokeswoman for PG&E, said its Solar Schools program serves about 100 schools and 100,000 students. PG&E's Solar Schools program also includes solar-based curriculum, teacher training and a "Bright Ideas" grant.

Del Oro High School received a "Bright Ideas" grant this spring. The school was awarded \$15,000 from PG&E to install a monitored sun-tracking photovoltaic system outside a biology classroom and for a solar energy source for an agricultural program.

"The real point is to educate future leaders on the roles they can play in helping to meet California climate goals, not just as consumers but as future engineers and scientists," Zerwer said.

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