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Putting money where their mouth is, Banner installs rooftop solar array

by Jordan Almen

Since just before Christmas, a lot of activity has been taking place around, and on top of, the Kerkhoven Banner office. The work was recently completed, and now the Banner is being created with solar energy.

Ted and Kari Jo Almen, owners of the newspaper, have had solar energy on their minds for awhile, but they didn't seriously start to consider installing it until around a year ago. "I guess you kids have enlightened us a little to the fight for the earth," Ted said about his children — Spencer, who works in renewable energy; Jordan, who writes for the Banner; and Madeline, who is in her senior

year of college. "The information about the damage happening to the earth is out there," he said, "but it helped to be hearing it from you."

It also helped that the Banner seemed to be a natural fit for a solar installation. With a large, flat roof and no trees or taller buildings obstructing sunlight, the building was ideal. "We don't use that much electricity at the Banner," Ted explained, "but we do at home with our heating system, so we thought it would be a good choice financially."

In moving forward with a solar project, the Almens were trying to put their money where their mouth is. They have held some investments in Southern Company, which is primarily fossil fuels, so they

decided to use that money to fund their project. "We have run editorials and columns about climate change in the past," Ted said, "and we thought it would be a nice transfer of investment into renewable energy." He added, "And let's face it, it's going to make us money. We're not just doing this out of charity." On top of the inherent environmental benefits, the Almens made sure that their installation would not only pay for itself, but would eventually pay back dividends.

Once they decided they wanted to move forward, the Almens had a useful partner. "It was pretty simple," said Kari Jo. "Spencer pretty much did everything." Spencer earned a degree in environmental engineering and currently works for Enel Green Power helping to build large green energy projects. He was able to aid his parents in researching the viability and parameters of their project, and knew what questions to ask the companies that they considered hiring for the work.

"It's really not difficult calculus," (Continued on page 5)



Before any work was done, Dave Laursen of MNSolar inspected the rooftop of the Kerkhoven Banner office to see what size solar array would work. Installation of the 56 solar panels was completed the last week of the year, and will be generating electricity for the building as soon as Otter Tail Power hooks them into the grid.



Over 30 years this small project will save 523.72 tons of CO₂ from going into the atmosphere, equivalent to the carbon emissions of 58,787 gallons of gasoline, or 429.45 acres of U.S. forest sequestration of carbon.

Rooftop solar

(Continued from page 1)

Spencer said. "It's pretty obvious if you have an open, sunny space that isn't being used, especially if there is an electrical meter nearby. From there it was just reaching out to a few installers to compare offers."

"The Banner's system will produce more electricity than the office uses in a given year, so it will result in a modest payment from Otter Tail Power Company," Spencer said. According to the Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Information Administration, the environmental impact of switching from the Otter Tail generation mix to solar in this project will be the equivalent of saving 523.72 tons of CO2 over 30 years, 58,787 gallons of gasoline CO2 emissions saved, or 429.45 acres of U.S. forest sequestration of carbon.

The Almens were able to take advantage of some government incentives with their solar project. Through the U.S. Department of Agriculture they received a REAP (Renewable Energy for America Program) grant of slightly lower than 25% of the cost of the project. They are also taking advantage of a 30% Federal Investment tax credit. Spencer offered a discouraged comment on this credit, "As we've heard in solar, that is phasing out. Projects not started in 2019 are getting a lower incentive — the government wanted to phase out incentives for wind and solar so they would stand on their own, but they are still providing incentives for the fossil fuels, which have been an industry for more than a hundred years."

"I think the new generation is leading the way and showing some of us other people that things have to change," Ted said. "This is one little thing that we can do — we're not going to save the world with our little project, but if enough people take little steps it will make a big impact. I would love to see our project be a showcase for others."

The Banner project has intrigued others already. The first day that Almens met with the company who they would choose to do their project, MnSolar based in New London, Kevin Strandberg of Strandberg Insurance happened to walk by and was invited to hear the information. Scott Lamecker of Lamecker's General Store and member of the Kerkhoven City Council started asking about the project after seeing the building permit. Ted and Spencer have also been talking with the other members of Quinco Press, where the Banner is printed, and they are very interested in their own solar project. "We've had other private conversations with people who know we're doing this and who would love to do something as well,"

Ted said. "I think a lot of the incentive is financial, of course — if you can cut back on your utility bill, no one is against that — but I think people are also opening their eyes to the environmental catastrophe that is looming if nothing changes." He added, "We think it's just the right thing to do, but if it wasn't cost effective we wouldn't do it, there has to be a marriage of those things."

Ted recalled a conversation between Paul Douglas, Jordana Greene and a member of the Center of the American Experiment on WCCO that sticks in his memory. "This guy was bashing Governor Walz for wanting to make Minnesota carbon neutral by 2050, and he says, 'I'm an environmentalist, my favorite place is Glacier National Park.' Paul Douglas couldn't jump in quick enough. He said, 'You love Glacier? Do you realize that in the last 50 years glaciers there have diminished an average of 39%'?" Douglas identifies as a Republican and a conservative, and his remarks made an impact on Ted. (The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that all glaciers will be gone from Glacier National Park within 15 years.)

At the same time, Douglas commented that everyone wants renewable energy as long as it doesn't cost any more. "As I said in a column," Ted said, "wait a second, it's going to cost a lot more to keep using fossil fuels. The immediate cost can't be the only factor."

Kari Jo put it succinctly, "Many of the costs of fossil fuels will be paid in the future."

"It made me think, good lord, you wouldn't do something good for the future of the world if it will cost you a dime more?" Ted reflected.

With that mindset, the Almens chose to do a bigger project than just what could supply the Banner office with energy. "I wanted to do as



Mike and Mike, installers for MnSolar, lifted one of the 56 panels in place on the top of the Kerkhoven Banner building. The project will convert sunshine

into electricity, more than the Banner actually uses. The rest will be sold to Otter Tail Power Company.

much as the roof's capacity," Ted said. "Why go half ways? It's an investment."

For others wondering if solar is a good option for them, Spencer said that the first step is just figuring out if you have a suitable space for it. A good starting place is pwatts.nrel.gov, which uses satellite imagery to estimate the wattage and the simple payback a system could produce. "If that is in the ballpark of what would interest you the next step is reaching out to installers and asking for quotes," he said. "Probably the most important part is being able to compare quotes side-by-side." Most installers likely also have someone on staff or available to them to help with grant writing, as well, if a project may qualify for a REAP grant.

"A couple of things I asked about," Ted added, "was if our roof structure would hold it and how it would hold up to wind and hail. These panels are rated for pretty high wind and for the weather that we have in our area."

Many people question the effectiveness of solar in Minnesota, because of snow accumulation. Spencer assured that because they're black, they warm up quicker than other surfaces and are also sloped a bit. Some production is lost in the winter, but then you're also receiving less light due to the angle of the sun.

A lot of consideration went into the Almens' decision to install solar on their office rooftop. In the end, Ted and

Kari Jo are excited about the investment they have made financially, in their building, and for the environment.

Are you interested in your own solar project? Here are some resources to get started:

- pwatts.nrel.gov — uses satellite imagery to estimate capacity and a payback period for solar arrays
- www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rural-energy-america-program-renewable-energy-systems-ener

gy-efficiency — information about the REAP grant

• www.mnseia.org/find-installer — Minnesota solar installer listings

• www.cleanenergyresources.org/pace — resource for putting solar on existing business buildings and tying payments to the building, not the individual (particularly useful if the individual is not sure they will own their business by the end of the payment period.)

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