

Schools harness wind power to save money

By Paul Meincke

November 20, 2007 - Farmer and school board member Keith Bolin got to thinking - why don't we put the wind to work? The cost of electricity in the new Bureau Valley high school keeps climbing faster than forecast. Let's look at a wind turbine.

"We're not rich by any means. We're a rural district, so we knew we were gonna have to have some help," said Supt. Terry Gutshall, Bureau Valley District 340.

So they got a grant, took out a loan and became the first school district in Illinois to put up a wind turbine - right out in back of the high school which now gets all its electricity from this machine.

"We're running at 660 kilowatts right now, we're at capacity," said Gutshall.

The turbine generates more electricity than the high school needs, so the extra is sold onto the grid. That adds up to about \$30,000 a year in new income for Bureau Valley.

"That buys a lot of books. That's a teacher, and that's things you don't have to cut from your curriculum," said Gutshall.

"That is wealth that grandma and grandpa who live down the road don't have to pay to support their school system. That's true, new wealth," said Bolin

The message from Manlius spread west to the Erie, Illinois school district Number 1 where they got a big grant and bought an even bigger turbine. Its pieces look like stages of a giant rocket ship sitting out in back of the middle school. The two-ton blades are as long as the wings on a 747. It's not up yet because of an air-rights dispute with a neighboring farmer, but when it is, the superintendent says, it'll bring a large measure of financial stability and independence to a small school district.

"Ours is the only one we've found in the United States that connects an entire school district under one turbine of multiple buildings," said Supt. Mike Ryan, Erie School District.

Enter the Keeneyville school district in west suburban Hanover Park, the first of a growing number of suburban school districts working toward a wind turbine.

"I'm 100 percent confident this will happen," said Gary Ofisher, Keeneyville District 20.

Unlike the rural districts, there are Hanover Park homes within eyesight of where the turbine would go. And not everyone likes the way they look. Aesthetics is not the only obstacle. Not every location has the sustained winds necessary to justify a turbine, and Hanover Park will spend roughly a year charting winds to make its case. Buying a wind turbine is a lot more expensive today than it was three years ago, and for a school district, for instance, the return on investment may take 12 years.

And the companies that build these machines prefer to sell a lot of them at once - not onesies and twosies to school districts. Still, here's the big picture. The 4-year-old Mendota Hills wind farm in Lee County. It's among six privately held wind farms in the state. More are planned.

"Illinois is in the middle of a wind power boom. There's more wind power in development in Illinois right now than any other state in the country," said Howard Learner, Environmental Law and Policy Center. That's because Illinois has wind, a power grid easily reached, a big market and now a new law that says by the year 2025, 25 percent of the electricity Illinois needs must come from renewable sources - most of that would be wind power. And out in Bureau Valley, they're ahead of the curve, smiling because the turbine will ultimately mean \$150,000 in new income for the school district.

"So when you pay off the note, what you gonna do with all this money? Well I've never seen a government body have a struggle with how to spend it. I've never met one yet," said Bolin.