

Glass City group making inroads with solar projects

10/11/2020

BY TOM HENRY / THE BLADE



Moses Byler, with YellowLite, hooks up wiring as he installs solar panels on the roof of the 629 Locust Street apartment building in Toledo on Thursday, Oct. 8, 2020.

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Welcome to federally subsidized housing in North Toledo, solar energy.

Often seen as a niche luxury item for the affluent or an environmental do-gooder's dream, solar energy is about to become a reality at a four-story, Section 8 apartment building operated by Vistula Management Co. on downtown Toledo's edge at 629 Locust St.

The \$105,000 project at the building with 50 apartments for qualifying senior citizens and low-income families is expected to be completed soon.

First-year electricity cost savings are estimated at \$4,000. The panels are expected to last at least 30 years.

The energy-saving panels are going up on the building's rooftop thanks to the efforts of a local nonprofit called [Glass City Community Solar](#), which grew out of the University of Toledo's solar research programs.

It has engaged help from a number of partners, including Tempe, Ariz.-based First Solar, LLC., which has one of the world's largest plants dedicated to manufacturing solar panels in Perrysburg Township. A second local First Solar factory

opened a year ago nearby in Lake Township.

Another important partner is Muskegon, Mich.-based [Chart House Energy](#), a solar developer trying to make inroads into unconventional neighborhoods.

Its for-profit status complements the work of Glass City Community Solar, according to Rob Rafson, Chart House Energy's owner-president, because that qualifies it to take advantage of tax benefits that nonprofits can't. That allows it to commit more startup capital, he said.

"Traditionally, solar was for the rich. I'm really sick of hearing that," Mr. Rafson said. "We've taken the approach that solar isn't just for the rich; it's for everyone."

Evan Nichols, Glass City Community Solar's vice president, agreed, adding that rooftop solar panels have historically been viewed as "a bit of a privilege thing," but that times are changing now with companies such as First Solar making more affordable panels.

"We're continuing to look at more options and more opportunities," said Mr. Nichols, a 2018 UT chemical engineering graduate who is now a First Solar application engineer.

Many challenges lie ahead, though, for providing solar energy to other low-income residential buildings, and Mr. Rafson said some of them will require legislation to address them.

"Community solar projects are a huge challenge," he said. "In general, utilities see them as competition for their business model."

The formation of Glass City Community Solar is rooted in the U.S. Department of Energy's first "[Solar in Your Community Challenge](#)" put out in the fall of 2016 for seed funding, according to Randy Ellingson, a UT physics and astronomy professor who serves as the group's treasurer and technical and education coordinator.

Its proposal won a \$50,000 grant to help establish the group in the spring of 2017, he said.

The group hopes to inspire young people in low-income communities to consider pursuing careers in solar energy, perhaps as installers, electricians, or other vocations.

"Education is a goal," Mr. Ellingson said. "We have engaged UT students throughout these efforts."

On average, wealthier people use more energy than low-income people. They usually have more air conditioning and appliances. Their contribution to climate change tends to be greater, Mr. Ellingson said.

Conversely, coal-fired power plants — still a chief source of electricity, albeit one in decline — tend to be near low-income neighborhoods, resulting in a disparate impact from pollution, called by such terms as environmental injustice and energy inequality.

"By bringing clean energy to the rooftops of low-income neighborhoods, we're moving in the right direction," Mr. Ellingson said.

John Kiely, Vistula Management's president, said another benefit of the Locust Street project is it could give "residents of the building and the surrounding Vistula neighborhood a sense of doing something about climate change."

"The potential of changing [the neighborhood's] consciousness is at least as important as the energy itself," he said.

Mr. Ellingson is part of UT's Wright Center for Photovoltaics Innovation and Commercialization.

Mr. Nichols said Glass City Community Solar is thriving because of First Solar's relationship with UT and its Wright Center for PVIC.

Others involved in the project include [Midwest Solar Consultants](#) and [YellowLite](#), a Cleveland-based installer.

For more about Glass City Community Solar, watch [this YouTube video](#).