

Mount Vernon Airport moves forward on solar projects

Updates provided at Tuesday's Airport Board meeting

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MOUNT VERNON — Mount Vernon Outland Airport has officially signed a contract authorizing the installation of roof-mounted solar panels on two hangar buildings at the facility.

A key part of the contract was making sure it included a performance guarantee from the solar company for how much energy the panels will produce, which was accomplished, said Airport Director Chris Collins.

"We signed the contract for that Tuesday after a thorough review by legal counsel and Ross Rubenacker from Affordable Gas & Electric," Collins said. "We got production guarantees that (the panels) will meet or exceed 90% of the engineer's estimate. We're very happy to have that in there."

In September, the airport awarded a \$419,547 bid to Sun Solar to install and create a solar panel system at the airport. The panels will be placed on the two hangars south of the airport's terminal — Hangar A-1100 and Hangar A-1200 — and officials expect the solar panels to save the airport about \$28,000 a year on energy costs.

While the total cost of the project is roughly \$419,000, about 90% of that will be covered by solar incentives that are offered through the state and federal government and through Ameren Illinois. The airport is borrowing money to cover the upfront cost, but over a seven-year period the incentives will reimburse the airport for much of its expenditures.

Collins provided an update on the airport's solar initiatives at Tuesday's Mount Vernon Airport Authority Board of Commissioners meeting.

"What that project is designed to do is to help us pay the massive electric bill for the Koziara Terminal," Collins said. "It's about a \$28,000 savings a year. It's a \$419,000 project that will essentially be covered 90% by the state and federal subsidies. ... So everything we're doing is long term, for the future benefit of the airport."

It likely will not be until next spring before the solar panels are mounted and begin producing energy, Sentinel archives state.

Also on Tuesday, Collins delivered an update on another solar-related initiative, this one involving possibly leasing some of the airport's fields to solar developers. Currently, the airport is considering leasing one large field located east of the airport lake behind some trees. Collins said that he will meet with Rubenacker next week to create a draft Request For Proposals (RFP) to solicit bids from solar companies for the leasing of that field. Collins will then bring that draft RFP back to the Airport Board for consideration.

"It's about 90% surrounded by trees," Collins said of the field in question. "We feel (that) it would be perfect for a community solar project. ... It may or may not happen, but we want to try and maximize our income potential and that would be a good way to do that."

In addition Tuesday, the Airport Board gave Collins permission to apply for a new federal FAA grant program called Zero Emissions Vehicles (ZAV). If Mount Vernon Airport is selected and meets the guidelines, it could receive a new F-150 electric truck at a very low cost.

The program is a 90/10 split, whereby the federal government would provide 90% of the cost of the truck and the local match would be 10% which in this case is about \$9,552. The truck has to be operated by airport employees and cannot be used as a courtesy vehicle for pilots to use to go into town, Collins said. If it works out, the project could be very beneficial for the local airport, Collins said.

"The goal is to keep the vehicle on site," Collins said. "We do have a vehicle that's well past its operational life. ... Where else can you buy a brand new pickup truck for \$9,500?"

Other Airport Board actions Tuesday included:

- The board heard updates on various projects, including the parking lot project, Air Evac Joint Base Jefferson, the runway lighting replacement and the Fixed Based Operations modernization.

- The board approved a new natural gas contract renewal for heating the airport facility. The airport will pay 46 cents per therm, a slight decrease over the current 54 cents per therm rate. The renewal is for a 12-month period.