



Spring In Your Step - Chisago County at Ground Zero of a Clean Energy Revolution

By Paul Douglas



Solution to Climate Change Shining Above Our Heads

Psychiatrists tell us that people often deny there's a problem until and unless there's an obvious solution. I'm getting past the gloom and doom and chronic hand-wringing by focusing on solutions.

Yesterday "Caring for Creation" co-author Mitch Hescox and I spoke in Chisago County, where all 20,000 homes are powered by solar. The North Star Project, largest in the Midwest, has 440,000 panels and generates 100MW.

Think climate change is a hoax? The atmosphere doesn't really care what you believe, but do you like to save money? "We are projected to save \$6 million over 30 years" says Pat Collins, at Chisago Lakes Schools. Turns out there is an ROI. In many parts of America, solar and wind is now the cheapest form of new electricity, even more cost-effective than natural gas. Government shouldn't pick winners and losers; let the markets (and technological innovation) decide.

As someone pointed out to me, God buried toxic, carcinogenic 'dinosaur juice' deep underground - and put a free, safe, secure fusion reactor directly above our heads. He couldn't have made it any more obvious.

Some of that free solar power lures the mercury to 60F again today before the next storm brushes southern Minnesota with showers late Wednesday into Thursday AM. The atmosphere is still too cool and dry and stable for any widespread severe outbreaks close to home.

Highs reach the 50s into next week; a few degrees above average. Not bad at all.



A Clean Power Revolution. You might think that an inevitable clean energy revolution would kick off in Edina, or Woodbury or Wayzata. You'd be wrong. It turns out Chisago County has been the definition of an early-adopter with solar. Here's an excerpt from 7th grade Middle School Teacher Pat Collins: "*...Chisago County has enough solar capacity to power 20,000 homes ... and we have... about 20,000 homes. :) We have a number of solar gardens in the county, including the largest solar installation in the Midwest, the North Star Project, which has 440,000 panels and is 100 MW.* <http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2016/10/19/north-star-solar-project-north-branch/>



Energy Independence. Pat Collins continues: *"Very soon our school district will become one of the first school districts in the country to be 110% solar powered. Our school district is called Chisago Lakes Schools and has 3 Elementary buildings, 1 Middle School and 1 High School. Each school has a 40 KwH photovoltaic system on it. The school district had such a great experience with solar that they bought and additional 6,221 panels in a Solar Garden at Eictens Cheese Farm and will have another 8,000 panels soon in another solar garden that is under construction. This will give us around 15,000 panels. Our solar odyssey began in 2008 when I and some 7th graders decided our middle school should go solar. We met with the school board and asked permission to raise \$103,000 to put up a 10 KwH system. This was at the height of the great US economic collapse and the school board was skittish as we wanted no money from the school, just the opportunity to raise \$100K. The school board said no, but a few weeks later at another meeting, three 7th graders convinced them we could do this. And two years later they pulled it off, raising \$73,000 (falling prices) to fund a 10 KwH system. A couple of years later, we wrote a grant for \$722,000 and led Minnesota schools into 3rd party leasing. Each step of the way was so positive for our schools... that they eventually bought into local solar gardens to bring us to 110% solar powered. Our Solar panels will save our taxpayers 6 million dollars over 30 years and prevent 56 million pounds of Carbon Dioxide from being emitted into the atmosphere. Here is a video that reflects a bit on that effort:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDhgY7UhQ9s&t=24s>



How Has Solar Improved the Local Area? I asked Pat Collins to address the ROI for solar: *"I think the economics of our solar panels will be staggering... saving 6 million dollars over 30 years is great with always tight school budgets.... and then the question becomes... what programs can the extra money be put into? Fine arts? Academics? Bricks and Mortar? And the thought that we will prevent 56 million pounds of Carbon Dioxide from being emitted is priceless.... Perhaps the best benefit is that the solar energy and the news that it brings keeps environmental concerns in the spotlight and family conversations and the cost benefit of that is presses.*

I think the public and neighboring districts see Chisago Lakes Schools as progressive and as innovators? And today's world sees a competition for students with open enrollment.....based on perception and quality of programs. As Mitch mentioned to me after your talk at Minnehaha... "Your school is a template for what other schools need to do" Our students push into solar helped educate a community who saw this renewable energy as nothing but a positive which helped pave the way for the county to do their solar work.... a trickle "up" effect...."



Call to Action. Interested in more information about a money-saving solar power solution for your school (or town?) Reach out to Pat Collins directly: pcollins@isd2144.org