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# NEWEST SOLAR PROJECT A COOPERATIVE EFFORT



## BLUFF PRAIRIE PROJECT MAKES COMMUNITY SOLAR EASY, ACCESSIBLE, AND AFFORDABLE

by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager



In 2014 Vernon Electric Cooperative (VEC) installed the first community solar array in the state of Wisconsin, a 305-kilowatt (KW) system which also happened to be the largest array in the state at that time. Since then, VEC has remained at the forefront of renewable

energy by adding two more solar arrays: a 520 KW array at our headquarters facility in Westby, and a 300 KW array near Liberty Pole. In partnership with Dairyland Power, two more 1-megawatt (MW) arrays were installed near Liberty Pole and Hillsboro, respectively. Altogether there is more than 2.5 MW of utility-scale solar arrays in VEC's service area. VEC has also enabled over 2.5 MW of residential solar, owned by members of our co-op. This gives us a grand total of over 5 MW of renewable energy locally. But soon there will be more...

Earlier this year we announced the Bluff Prairie Community Solar array, a 1.5 MW array located near Red Mound. We are pleased to announce the near completion of the project, which contains 3,276 panels and is expected to produce over 3 million kilowatt hours (kWh) per year. To maximize the amount of energy produced, OneEnergy Renewables installed bifacial

solar panels on single-axis trackers. The trackers follow the sun from east to west throughout the day.

You often hear us discuss our cooperative principles; Cooperation Among Cooperatives is one of those principles. Electric cooperatives throughout the country have a common goal of providing safe, affordable, and reliable electricity to the members we serve. Development of the Bluff Prairie Solar project was coordinated with nine other electric cooperatives to get a better price and return on investment for our members. In total, 22 MW of new solar generation is coming on-line at electric cooperatives across the state over the next few months.

"Partnering with Vernon Electric Cooperative and the landowner for the Bluff Prairie Solar Project has been a great experience. OneEnergy and our whole Midwest development and construction team appreciate the opportunity to serve the community by generating local, clean energy," said Eric Udelhofen, VP of development for One Energy.

Throughout the years, solar energy has become increasingly popular as more people install solar at their home or utilities invest in large-scale solar farms. Our members often tell us they would like to participate in solar, but the up-front cost is more than they would like to invest. As we continue to look at ways to diversify our energy portfolio, we



must also consider if it will be an added benefit to our members. If history has shown us anything, it's that our members are very interested in community solar. In 2014 our 1,001-panel community solar farm in Westby sold out in just two weeks.

Overall, 60 percent of the Bluff Prairie Solar array is dedicated to community solar. The other 40 percent is committed to a buy-all, sell-all agreement with our wholesale power provider, Dairyland Power Cooperative.

Output from approximately 2,000 panels will be available for members to subscribe as part of our community solar program. Members can purchase an annual subscription for \$50 per panel and will receive the output as a credit on their bill each month. During the summer months (June, July, August) subscribers will receive a rate of 7 cents per kWh for the output of their subscriptions. All other months, they will receive a rate of 5.2 cents per kWh.

Each panel subscription is projected to produce 960 kWh per year, with an estimated annual credit of \$56. The number of subscriptions a member can purchase will be determined by how many kilowatts they consumed the previous year. For example, if a member consumed 10,000 kWh last



year, they will be eligible to purchase 10 subscriptions.

We decided on the subscription model to allow more members the opportunity to participate in community solar. This model allows members who no longer wish to participate in the program to opt out and not be responsible for selling their subscription to someone else. Annually, participants will have the option to renew for the next year.

When designing our program, we analyzed several scenarios to maximize the number of members who could participate. The Wisconsin Office of Energy Innovation, housed within the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin, committed

\$250,000 in State Energy Program grant funds to Couleecap, Inc. to reduce the cost of electricity for households that qualify for energy assistance by offering free access to community solar benefits. This created a great opportunity for two local organizations to partner together to provide renewable energy opportunities for income-eligible members. A new program called Energize Wisconsin was developed.

In the Energize Wisconsin program, Couleecap will become a subscriber on behalf of eligible households. The grant will be divided over ten years, equating to \$25,000 per year and VEC will provide an additional \$2,500 per year. The grant, plus the funds contributed from VEC, will provide 550

subscriptions of the Bluff Prairie solar project and will produce an estimated 528,000 kWh per year. We anticipate annual bill credits will exceed \$30,000 for eligible members.

Hetti Brown, executive director for Couleecap Inc. stated, "We are excited to bring solar access to utility customers who have the highest cost burden. Cost is a steep barrier for many households interested in solar participation. With


"Cost is a steep barrier for many households interested in solar participation. With the program Energize Wisconsin, we are removing that barrier."

– Hetti Brown, Couleecap Inc.

the program Energize Wisconsin, we are removing that barrier. Couleecap appreciates our partners at Vernon Electric Cooperative and the WI Office of Energy Innovation for funding and collaborating with us on this project."

A unique advantage of installing a large solar array is it provides us the opportunity to improve pollinator habitat. It is often assumed the ground beneath the solar panels will never be restored to what it once was; however, by planting prairie grasses and wildflowers, a healthy root system will develop to prevent soil erosion and improve habitat for insects that pollinate crops we use for food.

There has been an immense amount of work dedicated by our employees and partners to the Bluff Prairie Solar project. After nearly two years of planning, preparation, and construction, we are all excited to see this project come together. We look forward to hearing from you and your interest in participating in this community solar project.

**YES**, I am interested in participating in Bluff Prairie community solar. 

\_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

No. of panels \_\_\_\_\_

**Submit by December 1, 2023, or submit online at [vernonelectric.org](http://vernonelectric.org).**

**\$50 per panel subscription**

Return to Vernon Electric Cooperative,  
110 Saugstad Rd., Westby, WI 54667



# SITTIN' PRETTY FARM:

## *All are welcome*

By Leah Call

**A**t a time when the country is so divided, it's good to know there are people like Vernon Electric Cooperative member Steve Lawless committed to bringing people together through the non-profit ventures he's created.

"It's about people coming together, no matter what their background or beliefs are, and working together for the benefit of the whole community. That is what is really important right now," said Lawless. "We can easily focus on the things that separate us, but it's important to find the things that bring us together."

Sittin' Pretty Farm—on County Road NN, five miles outside of Viroqua—is the home base for Lawless' altruism. The farm's pizza barn hosts Friday Night Pizza from May through October. All pizza night proceeds go to support the 501c3 Further Along, with the mission of expanding humanity through nature, adventure, learning, service, and community.

Each Friday, a local non-profit also receives a portion of the pizza proceeds. Among the non-profits helped this year are the local chapter of the American Cancer Society, Living Faith Food Pantry, Driftless Folk School, Sleep in Heavenly Peace, and the Amara Rose Foundation.

"Last year we raised over \$15,000, and this year we will



be over \$20,000," noted Lawless.

Each pizza night is run 100% by volunteers—from preparing the dough to making and selling the pizzas. Individuals from the local non-profit along with members of area service organizations such as the Lions, Eagles, Rotary and Kiwanis make it all happen.

Orders for the 16-inch wood-fired pizzas must be placed before 5 p.m. the day of the event.

You can show up and hope to get a pizza without ordering ahead, but you'll likely be out of luck. "We have a limited amount of dough," notes Lawless. "Most Fridays we sell out."

What's a night of fellowship and pizza without music? Every pizza night includes live music, typically enjoyed outdoors. "The barn has a loft, so the music is set up there if we need to be inside because of weather," Lawless explained.

### Adventure and Service

A former educator, Lawless is committed to creating adventure and service learning experiences. In addition to the pizza nights, he leads a non-profit called the Merry Green Marvel, another project that supports Further Along Inc. "The Merry Green Marvel is actually a sleeper coach bus that we use to take kids out on river outings and kayaking. It sleeps up to 32 people," explained Lawless. "The 501c3 is named after it."



Dubbed “a rolling community of service and adventure,” the 40-foot bus carries youth and adults to summer camps and canoe excursions along the Mississippi backwaters and other waterways. “For the last four years, we’ve been going down the Wisconsin River,” explained Lawless. “We teach kids, age 10-13, the basics of canoeing and safety. It’s a five-day trip down the river, sleeping on sandbars.”

The Merry Green Marvel makes a trip south in the winter. “When colleges are on spring break, we do service work in the south—mostly disaster response around the New Orleans area,” added Lawless.

Though activities on the farm slow down in winter, there is a concert series and some pop-up restaurants. The farm’s three guest houses and off-grid retreat cabin are available for rent year-round.

Information on all events and gatherings can be found on Sittin’ Pretty Farm’s website and Facebook page.

### A Life of Service

Lawless moved to the area 20 years ago. His parents, Harry and Evelyn, are the inspiration behind Sittin’ Pretty Farm



and his other service-focused ventures. “My parents came of age during the Depression and World War II. They lived their lives giving back. I’m privileged to be in a place where I can give back,” said Lawless. “I’ve committed my life to serving others.”

In 2018, when Lawless purchased the rural lot that would become Sittin’ Pretty Farm, he discovered a massive 8-foot diameter, two-ton iron wheel among the discarded junk left behind by the former

owner. That wheel now has a prominent spot on the farm. It symbolizes the Spirit moving, humanity connecting with one another.

A description on the website reads, “Raising the wheel and raising the barn became Sittin’ Pretty’s mission to keep the Spirit moving. With the help of many, we would create a place with spacious hospitality where all are welcome to commune through food, music, art and retreat spaces.”



Left: Friday Night Pizza nights raise money for Further Along and other local non-profit groups. Right: An 8-foot iron wheel on the farm symbolizes the Spirit moving.

### Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

110 Saugstad Road, Westby, WI 54667  
608-634-3121 • 608-447-5051  
email: info@vernonelectric.org  
website: www.vernonelectric.org

### Trevor Clark, Editor

