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## *Sunny days ahead for Ashland energy users*



*City of Ashland Director of Administrative Services Dick Wanderscheid gets a bird's eye view of the solar panels atop the city council chambers. The Oregon Office of Energy assisted in launching the innovative Solar Pioneer Project with a low-interest, long-term loan. Photo by Bill McClain.*

By Ann Grim  
Oregon Office of Energy

Solar panels have become a common sight – if you live in Ashland.

Panels now adorn the rooftops of several landmark buildings in town including the internationally known Shakespeare Festival, the Ashland police station, city council chambers and the Southern Oregon

University library.

The “Solar Pioneer Project” is generating electricity, community support for renewable resources and inquiries from other cities.

“I just got a call from the city of San Jose,” said Dick Wanderscheid, director of administrative services for the city of Ashland.

“There is a lot of interest out there in what we’ve done here,” he said.

The Ashland municipal utility installed the

panels last year. The 30-kilowatt project is the largest solar generation venture in the Northwest. Ashland is one of just two cities in the nation to take on such a project.

Solar energy is more expensive than traditional power sources. So economics was not the driving force.

“If we had based the project on economics, it would not have gotten off the ground,” said Wanderscheid.

Instead, a collaboration of partners wanted to demonstrate that solar power was viable in a small Oregon community interested in clean air and renewable “green” power. The city of Ashland was a logical choice. It has a long history of promoting the use of solar energy. In 1981, it passed one of the first citywide ordinances in the United States that protects solar access.

“Lots of people supported this project,” said Wanderscheid. “Once it got started, it was like a huge snowball rolling down the hill.”

Key players were former Mayor Catherine Shaw, the six-member city council, Wanderscheid and other city administrators and employees, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Southern Oregon University, Avista Corp. (the Ashland local natural gas supplier), Bonneville Power Administration, Bonneville Environmental Foundation and the Oregon Office of Energy.

## ***State loan provided funding base***

The Office of Energy provided a \$317,000 loan through its Energy Loan Program. Established in 1979, the program offers low-interest, fixed-rate, long-term loans. The loans can be used for Oregon projects that save energy or that use renewable energy, recycled materials to create products or alternative fuels.

The Office of Energy also provided a Business Energy Tax Credit through Avista Corp. that helped offset the cost of the project.

“We wanted to fund this project because it involved the entire community in taking

steps to offer an environmentally preferred power product to the citizens of Ashland,” said Office of Energy Senior Loan Officer Dennis Knight.

The Bonneville Environmental Foundation also provided funding. Established in 1998 to promote renewable energy projects and watershed restoration in the Northwest, the organization awarded its first three grants in 1999. One was a \$62,500 two-for-one matching grant for the Solar Pioneer Project.

“We recognized that Ashland was a prime site for our first solar demonstration project,” said Angus Duncan, president of Bonneville Environmental Foundation and a Southern Oregon native. “The community supports renewable energy, and its citizens are willing to pay the higher costs in return for the greater environmental quality solar energy delivers.”

The Bonneville Power Administration added \$80,000 to increase the size of the system. The money will go toward buying power from panels at the Ashland police station for 20 years. Bonneville will resell the power through its Environmentally Preferred Power portfolio.

Southern Oregon University and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival each invested \$15,000 for 24 solar panels on their buildings. They’ll recoup their investments with the help of 260 residential and business consumers who volunteered to pay an extra \$4 or more on their monthly utility bills for the power. At a rate of 25 cents per kilowatt-hour, the original investments will be paid off in about 10 years.

“The only marketing we did was sending one utility bill stuffer to 9,000 citizens,” said

Wanderscheid. “We were very happy with the response especially considering that electric rates have been increasing.”

## ***Touch the sun***

Wanderscheid and other city employees have been busy in the past year showing the solar panels to school children, industry representatives, civic groups and others interested in solar technology. The city also provides an informational kiosk at the city council chambers that displays real-time output. The city’s Web site has a real-time monitor of the system ([www.ascensiontech.com/RTD/ashlandrtd.html](http://www.ascensiontech.com/RTD/ashlandrtd.html)).

The solar electric system has required little maintenance in its year of operation. Lightning strikes hit twice, but only required a switch to be reset to start the system again.

The Solar Pioneer Project is now supporting residents who install solar power panels on their homes. The city is offering a \$2 per watt rebate for solar electric systems. On top of that, the Oregon Office of Energy offers state residents a tax credit of \$3 per peak watt – up to \$1,500 – for solar electric systems.

So on your next trip to Ashland, look up. You’ll see electricity being produced on the rooftops of its biggest buildings – and maybe even the homes of some pioneering residents.

For more information on the state’s Energy Loan Program and energy tax credits, visit the Oregon Office of Energy Web site ([www.energy.state.or.us](http://www.energy.state.or.us)).

*This article was submitted by the Oregon Office of Energy.*