Pickens to get solar farm

Blue Ridge Electric leases district land

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Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative has leased property from the Pickens County School District to build a solar farm behind the district's Career and Technology Center and Chastain Elementary School that could be used as an educational facility as well as generating electricity for Blue Ridge customers.

The School Board approved leasing 3.8 acres fronting U.S. 123 at $500 per acre per year for 25 years.

"We feel like this is an opportunity to get on the cutting edge for a solar curriculum at the tech school and at the career and technology center on the high school level," said Zach Hinton, manager of community and government relations for Blue Ridge Electric.

The cooperative plans to work with Tri-County Technical College to develop a curriculum using the site as a laboratory.

Construction of the facility will be scheduled during the school year so students could watch its progress, he said.

Tri-County Tech plans to add three or four courses in solar and sustainable energy as a result, said Trustee Brian Swords, who is also director of Tech's Easley campus.

"We see a lot of educational benefit for us (at Tri-County Tech)," he said.

Santee Cooper already has developed a solar power curriculum, which Pickens County could use as a model, Hinton said.

The project is part of Blue Ridge's plans to build 5 megawatts of solar generating power across the state, at a cost of $12 million, Hinton said. He didn't have a cost estimate for the Pickens County facility.

The site on school property will generate 250 kilowatts, he said.

The solar farm itself will take up about ½ acre, with the rest of the 3.8 acres as buffer to prevent shading. The career center is looking at using the buffer area for a livestock educational program, and Blue Ridge would be willing to provide fencing, Hinton said.

"We are starting to see renewable technology really kind of come into its own right now....and the technology is just going to continue to get better

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and better," he said. "We feel like we need to be on the forefront of this."

Blue Ridge will sell the power generated from the solar farm to its members on a subscription basis, panel by panel, and whatever power is generated on their panel would be credited to them, Hinton said.

The lease will generate $2,000 a year or $50,000 over the life of the lease.

"This is a huge opportunity from just a visual perspective teaching kids, hey look, that's something we can do," Trustee Henry Wilson said. "It's valuable. I think it has immeasurable education value, not just for kids but for the people in the community."

Trustee Alex Saitta threatened to abstain from voting for the lease because Hinton couldn't say how much money the Coop would be making off the facility. He said the lease money is "probably not even going to cut the lawn at the career center."

"If you're generating a lot of electricity that you're making money on, I think it would even be a better PR thing to say we do all these things plus we power the building over here, the career center, for nothing," he said.

The facility wouldn't generate enough electricity to power the career center, Hinton said.

"I can't see why we would not want to do something like this, especially if our students can benefit from it if there's no cost to us," Board Chairman Judy Edwards told Saitta.

In the end, Saitta voted to approve the lease, making the decision unanimous.