

County aims to solarize buildings

By Casey Mann

The Chatham County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously last week to begin a process which may lead to public buildings being powered by solar panels.

The program was introduced to the commissioners at their work session two weeks ago by Amanda Robertson, a member of the county's Climate Change Advisory Committee and a member of Chatham Clean Path, a citizen group with the aim of bringing solar energy to the community.

"There are so many benefits of solar for Chatham County citizens. The most significant are that it is an affordable, reliable, local, and clean energy source. Solar energy is not just affordable, it is in fact one of the best investments we can make, with one of the highest returns I have found," Robertson said.

The program introduced by Robertson involves an organization called SolSmart, a U.S. Department of Energy funded recognition program for communities that take steps to reduce solar costs and promote the technology in their communities.

Robertson's presentation focused on the economic benefits for the county if the county invests in solar energy for public buildings. While residents who install solar panels on their homes

receive tax breaks of up to 30 percent from the federal government, local governments cannot take advantage of it as they don't pay taxes.

However, Duke Energy has an incentive and refund program for residents, businesses, and non-profits including local governments who install solar panels on their buildings. Residents can receive up to \$6,000, businesses can receive up to \$50,000, and non-profits can receive up to \$75,000 in credits, according to Robertson.

These refund credits would be available for the county for each meter that uses solar technology, meaning the county could receive credits for every building on which they were installed.

Robertson estimates that the investment for the county would reach net zero in 12 years per installation while noting that due to reduced energy costs, they would begin seeing a return on investment right away.

The plan would begin with the county engaging with SolSmart which has a free program for local municipalities to provide financial and technical support for an assessment of all government buildings. That analysis would determine which buildings would be most viable for solar energy and the size of solar system may be required.

Following the assessment, the county commissioners would then

decide which buildings, if any, should be included in a request for proposal from solar installation providers.

The board voted unanimously to have county staff begin the process of engaging SolSmart with the intention of having a recommendation for the request for proposal to the Board by September.

The move is not unexpected from the Board. Nearly one year ago to the day, the board passed a resolution supporting a transition from a fuel-based commercial electric grid to one that is produced completely by renewable or carbon-free sources by 2050.

"A move in county government to solar sends a powerful message to county businesses and citizens that the time has arrived for all of us to start taking the benefits of solar energy more seriously. I think Chatham County will be first in our state to move to nearly 100% clean solar energy, and not just in our county government. I believe we'll see residents, farms, businesses and schools make this move very soon," Robertson said.

Robertson is pleased with the support of the Board and the staff to consider a move to solar energy for public buildings.

"I think we currently have a strong county board, one that consistently listens to their constituents - to the citizens of Chatham County. This request came from a group of citizens working with Chatham Clean Path, an effort to bring solar energy to all sectors of the

county," Robertson said. "And I think we have commissioners on our board that want the same things as the people who elected them. They believe in providing all of us a clean, healthy environment to live and work in and if you look at the history of the issues they've taken on and how they've voted over the past few years, it tells the same story again and again. I credit the commissioners with this decision, but also the citizens who brought this to them and who elected them in the first place."

Injured

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The vehicle fled north on Sanford Road toward US 64 Business.

Anyone with information about the incident is urged to contact Lieutenant S. Johnson with the Pittsboro Police Department at 919-542-3200, ext. 1155 or Sergeant D. Deshaies at 919-542-3200, ext. 1162.



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