

WCC is shining light on 'green' jobs

Nov 10, 2010 12:00:53AM

By Denise Linke For The Beacon-News

SUGAR GROVE — A new certification program at Waubonsee Community College could light residents' ways to jobs as renewable energy technology workers.

The sun shone brightly Monday on the college's new solar energy program. Workers installed a new photovoltaic array under cloudless skies, preparing the outdoor laboratory for use by students next spring.

The 24-panel array stands 33 feet wide and 10 feet tall and cost about \$44,000, said Waubonsee program development analyst Cassie Blickem. The college is paying for the array, an indoor renewable energy laboratory and other startup costs with a \$120,000 grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

"The national buzz around 'green' jobs and clean energy prompted us to add this program to our catalog," Blickem said. "We're hoping to attract electrical contractors who want to enter this field, both as students and as prospective employers of our students."

Waubonsee will offer its first solar energy class, Introduction to Photovoltaic Systems, this spring, Blickem said. A second class, Photovoltaic System Selection and Design, will start next fall and a third class, Installing and Maintaining Photovoltaic Systems, will begin in spring 2012.

Students who pass each class will receive a certificate of achievement; students who pass all three will qualify to take an accreditation exam administered by the North American Board-Certified Energy Practitioners professional association.

"Students will be able to work in the field without NABCEP accreditation, but it will open a lot of doors for them," said electrician Gregg Erickson, who will be teaching the photovoltaic classes.

"More and more businesses are looking into using solar energy, and there are only 11 NABCEP-certified installers in Illinois, so it's a big deal."

Waubonsee also will debut a geothermal energy class this spring, and a class sequence on small wind-energy systems is on the drawing board, Blickem said.

"Renewable energy technology will be booming in the next decade," Erickson predicted. "We have to have a demand for it because we have to wean ourselves away from fossil fuels.

"European countries are already ahead of us. Their economies are bubbling because their governments mandated a switch to renewable energy sources, so companies are locating factories there to be closer to their markets. I only hope our government does the same because it would push opportunities for employment in several different industries."

Waubonsee's solar panels are scheduled to go online today, Erickson said. Their electrical output will be monitored and displayed on the college's website so that students and the public will be able to learn how efficient photovoltaic arrays can be, he added. They also will help power Weigel Hall.

This spring's Introduction to Photovoltaic Systems course number is RET 110 and the Geothermal Systems course number is RET 170. For more information, visit the college website at www.waubonsee.edu.