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Major energy grant awarded to Osceola community

By Kyle Weaver

The Osceola community will receive a large amount of funding and access to resources in the next year, courtesy of a grant announced by state officials Thursday. According to the Wisconsin Office of Energy Independence and Governor Jim Doyle, more than \$400,000 in grants will be awarded to 23 community groups statewide that are working toward creating a “25x25” plan to meet Doyle’s energy goal, which is to generate 25 percent of the state’s electricity and transportation fuels from renewable resources by the year 2025. The Village of Osceola and the Osceola School District were named among the participants in the grant program.

“I think it’s recognition of where we’ve been and where we’re going with the school,” said Osceola School Board President Timm Johnson during a short interview last week. “It just puts us in a really good position to address our energy use.” Though specific terms of the grant and the planning process, including the amount of funding, have not yet been defined, Johnson and Osceola Village Administrator Neil Soltis said that the grant will likely allow the Village and the school district access to professional services to conduct an extensive audit of energy consumption in the publicly-owned and operated buildings and vehicles and to identify and explore opportunities to reduce that consumption and find new sources of energy. “What it really kind of sets the table for is ... transition over to more sustainable and renewable energy sources,” Soltis said.

The energy audit may lead the community to consider any number of energy projects and/or conservation efforts, including finding ways to harvest unused energy from the Village’s wastewater treatment system, creating additional uses for biodiesel — both in vehicles and in buildings — and growing it locally, switching public lighting systems over to LED bulbs, and establishing networks between local businesses, government and industries to share resources.

“There’s a whole load of options now for us to look at,” Soltis said. Johnson said the grant may offer opportunities to explore new programs, such as one that encourages production and consumption of locally grown foods. “There are a lot of embedded costs of transportation in produce,” Johnson said. “You can’t replace all (of the energy costs), but you certainly can look at reducing it.”

Johnson has been a proponent of energy conservation for the school district and in the community. Receiving the statewide grant is recognition that Osceola is a leading community in the area of energy conservation, Soltis said. Efforts by the school district, in installing solar energy collection panels to heat its pool water, by the Village in purchasing flex fuel vehicles and in studying energy conscious building designs, and community-wide by members of the various Natural Step study groups demonstrating an interest and commitment to the idea of sustainability, lead to the

grant being awarded, he said. More than 250 communities expressed an interest in the grant program and about 70 communities applied for the grant, according to an Office of Energy Independence Web site.

Soltis said the knowledge the local community will gain through the 25x25 planning process could possibly pave the way for future grants to be obtained. "The real key is implementation," Soltis said. "When you know what you're using now and what are your options based on the paybacks it gives us a real credible fact base to ask for some additional assistance." Ultimately, Soltis said, the ability to produce more energy locally could mean more economic development in the area, because it would keep spending on energy in the Osceola community. "Keeping money in the community becomes economic development," Soltis said. "That's one of the things that makes a community vital."

Soltis said the Village and school district will likely work closely with some of the leading organizations, such as Focus on Energy, as it goes through the audit and assessment phases of the grant. The St. Croix Institute for Sustainable Community Development of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls will also be a major partner in the study, he said. According to a press release, the 25x25 planning process will begin this month and is expected to be complete by December 2009. Soltis said a specific working committee will likely be identified soon to take advantage of the opportunity. For more information visit <http://power.Wisconsin.gov> and click on Energy Independent Communities.