

WHAT'S WORKING: ZOO'S SOLAR PROJECT GAINING NATIONAL ATTENTION

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The brutal heat is cooling off the energy bill this summer at the Cincinnati Zoo

"A year ago on a day like today, I was sweating it big time because of my electricity bill," said Mark Fisher, Senior Director of Facilities, Planning and Sustainability at the Cincinnati Zoo. "But the same day this year, I'm saying bring on the sun!"

That's because Fisher said their new solar panels generate at least 20-percent of their power.

Zoo managers installed 6,400 solar panels in the parking lot in April. They produce enough energy to keep all of the lights on in the Zoo's 70+ buildings within the Zoo's 70-acre campus.

"On a day like today, we're off the grid right now," said Fisher. "From 10 to four, we're literally producing more power than we're using."

All that green is saving the zoo green.

The Zoo can't store the energy produced so it's sent back to Duke Energy. Instead of owing money for the bill, the Zoo gets a credit. The power overage is shared with the Uptown community. In all, in just one day, the 1.6 megawatt display produces enough energy to power one house for a year. At the end of one year, the solar panels could produce enough energy to power 200-300 houses.

Fisher said it's not just about saving, but educating. Zoo managers have also installed an educational kiosk where families can learn about the new technology.

The structure also provides shade for nearly 800 of the 1,000 spots available at the Zoo's Vine Street Parking Lot.

It all grew out of an idea from a local company -- Melink Corporation.

Steve Melink is President of the company. He said his headquarters in Milford is one of the greenest buildings in the country.

You'll find just about every piece of solar technology on the market somewhere on the campus. Everything from silicon mounted on the roof to solar panels on the ground. Melink said he even has car chargers installed for those who have solar-powered vehicles.

"Every day of this week, we have been exporting back power back to the grid."

That's right. Melink said they haven't had one energy bill in the last three months.

But Melink wanted more.

He said he wanted to develop a marquee project in Cincinnati. A year and a half ago, they approached the Zoo. Fisher said Melink asked if they knew of a large space in Uptown where they could install solar panels. Fisher recommend the Zoo's parking lot. The two worked together and developed a plan to cement Cincinnati's place as a leader of the green movement.

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Today, the Zoo's solar panel project is the largest urban publicly accessible one in the country, but maybe not for long. Fisher said just about every zoo in the country has called about the project. Fisher said he's even heard from dozens of colleges, hospitals, and aquariums from around the world.

"We're not just saying this is our secret. Look at us. You can't have it. We're saying here's how we did it. Here's exactly how we did it, and hopefully this project will get people that were on the fence off the fence," said Fisher.

"My hope is that in another three to five years what we did at the Zoo is going to be commonplace," said Melink.

Fisher said it took 15 months to figure out the financing for the project, and only four months to build it. The Zoo didn't come up with any money up front, but worked with several organizations, including: Melink Corporation, PNC Bank, Uptown Consortium, the National Development Council and FirstEnergy Solutions. The group secured a number of tax credits to get the \$11-million needed to build the solar panels.

All major components of the solar canopy were manufactured either locally, or in other locations with the United States. In addition, the project has funded 10 scholarships at Cincinnati State Technical & Community College in their Greater Workforce Development Program.

Author/From the desk of Kimberly Holmes Wiggins