

## Two new solar projects coming to Oak Park

By Jim Jaworski Nov. 8, 2011



*Solar thermal panels loom large atop a Chicago coffee shop. Oak Park approved two separate projects that would involve solar technology. (Heather Charles/ Chicago Tribune)*

Oak Park is continuing its foray into alternative energy after approving two solar projects for the village.

In separate votes, the board unanimously approved a solar panel for The Avenue garage and solar canopies for electric cars Monday night. The projects are coming on the heels of the village signing on for a 100 percent green energy plan as officials continue to try to position Oak Park as a go-to location for renewable energy initiatives.

“There are a lot of different ways solar can be used,” said Village Sustainability Manager K.C. Poulos. “Grants are the most lucrative and cost feasible for us, and this is a big opportunity and a new priority for the village.”

The solar panel on The Avenue garage, at the southeast corner of Oak Park Avenue and North Boulevard, will be mostly paid via a grant through the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Equality. The grant will cover most of the roughly \$758,000 cost, leaving the village on the hook for about \$198,000.

Energy produced from the solar panel will be used to directly power the garage, with any excess energy being pushed into the grid. Joe Gordon of Niles-based Solar Service, which was selected by the village to install the panel, said it is guaranteed to last 25 years. The steel frame that will hold the panel is expected to last 75 years, so officials said they could swap out another solar panel later on at a relatively low price. “In 25 years, these modules will be producing 80 percent of the energy as it will outside the box tomorrow,” Gordon said.

While the village is spending close to \$200,000, the panel is expected to pay for itself after 15 years through electricity cost savings. Poulos said, after 25 years, the panel will have both paid for itself and saved the village an additional \$250,000 in energy costs.

“The electricity costs in our parking garages are quite significant,” said Village Manager Tom Barwin. The solar

panel is expected to be installed and functional by late winter or early spring.

The board also approved a deal with the iGo car sharing service and 350 Green, a Los Angeles-based company that installs electric car recharging stations, which will create two solar-powered canopies to recharge vehicles. One will be at the parking lot of Village Hall, 123 Madison St., and the other will be installed on North Boulevard between Marion Street and Forest Avenue.

Like the garage panels, extra energy will be pushed into the grid on sunny days, said Hali Sittig, regional manager for 350 Green. Likewise, the charging station will use energy from the grid on rainy days when the panels are not producing power.

“The solar canopy will generate electricity on a sunny day, and the way we will be working this back into the system, it will charge the stations prior to sending the electricity to the grid,” she said.

Each station will have four spots, two for iGo cars and two for the public. Members of the public can use the stations by signing on for a monthly membership with 350 Green or pay-as-you-go by calling a number listed at the station. Each canopy will have three charges that can replenish a vehicle in three to eight hours and one high-powered charger that can fill a battery in less than an hour.

There is no financial commitment for the village, as iGo and 350 Green will cover installation and maintenance costs. Sittig said she expects the canopies to be installed by the end of the year. These will be the first spaces on public property, as 350 Green also installed a charging station at Walgreens, 811 W. Madison St., in April. The company will also be installing a solar canopy at Jewel, 438 Madison St.