



MONONA GROVE

SCHOOL DISTRICT

Getting Started With School Solar Projects

<https://www.mononagrove.org/welcome/mghs-solar-project.cfm>



Getting started with School Solar Projects

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Schools and Opportunity for Clean Energy

- Public schools are the center of many communities, are highly visible, enjoy substantial public support, and impact the lives of every resident.
 - 2000 public buildings with flat roofs and primary energy use during daylight hours. Each one looking to save money!
 - Public schools are uniquely placed to increase acceptance and penetration of clean energy and sustainable practices throughout Wisconsin
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Barriers facing Public Schools & Sustainability

- Limited financial tools/funding mechanisms
 - Revenue limits, referenda requirement
- Limited experience/expertise outside educational mission
 - Expertise must come externally.
- Public openness, responsibility to taxpayer & electorate.
 - Educational, operational and fiscal challenges consume attention
 - Success is invisible, failures are front page news

**→ District leadership and School Boards are risk adverse and challenged to try new things outside of the educational mission.
We need grease the skids**



MG High School Solar Project – Goals

674 kWh array will supply ~50% of building's electric needs

District:

- Maximize environmental benefits
- Positive financial returns
- Provide educational opportunity
- Make clean energy integral to school operations

Wisconsin Schools:

- Provide a reproducible model
- Raise awareness of value
- Help others overcome barriers to entry
- Mainstream clean energy





MGHS Solar Project: Reproducible Model for Schools

- Convincing business case: Positive cash flow from first year of operation. \$1.5M lifetime return.
 - Business as usual funding tools: Bond funding under the referendum limit, 25% grant funding (not essential).
 - A retrofit to an existing facility. Most school buildings will continue in use for decades.
 - Publicize our data/experience/process.
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MG Solar Project – developing capacity

- Initial “low hanging fruit” (efficiency projects with State revenue exemption)
- Developed industry partners (McKinstry won RFP)
- Initial low risk projects led to more ambitious projects
- 4 rounds of projects: total \$250K/operational savings

Stakeholders developed literacy in sustainability, working relationships with vendors, trust in process.



Getting Started – Relationship Building

- *“The soft stuff makes the hard stuff happen” – Bob Willard*
 - Find allies in your community, other parents
 - School board members – get to know them
 - Find your allies at school
 - Get to know your school’s history
 - What’s already been done? Where are you now? How ready are you?
 - What’s the business case for this project?
 - Understand school leadership
 - Business Manager
 - Superintendent
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What we did... Sustainability committee

- Grassroots - Parents approached board members
 - Casual conversations, floated the idea
 - Committee takes work off school board's plate
 - School board ally built internal support
 - Parents and students spoke in support at school board meetings
 - Lesson learned: Start small, build relationships with one or two school board members. Find your champion and work through that person to influence the board. Don't just show up at a meeting and make a demand.
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Committee Members

- People who have done this before
 - Technical expertise, know how solar works, understand the financials
 - Know how to analyze energy data, can help identify opportunities
 - Community organizers/leaders/mobilizers
 - To build support and buy-in, lay the groundwork for next project
 - People with grant writing experience
 - People who understand local government
 - Build support among this group of influencers
 - Take lessons learned and apply to municipality
 - Teachers, students, district employees
 - Other
 - A project manager type. Plan and organize your work. GSD.
 - A photographer / multi-media / social media person
 - Someone connected to sustainability organizations; opportunities for collaboration, assistance.
 - People who are willing to work, and work well together.
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What worked and what didn't

- **Educating ourselves and the district:** Assuring the District and the Committee understood the environmental impact of the schools.
 - **How do we educate the students and change the community?:** The committee wanted the work to be embraced by the community and not just the committee.
 - **Developing a list of potential projects:** What changes could we fund and how to maximize the benefits.
 - **The EIGP Grant provided focus and spark:** Helped us recognize our ability to fund a major project with measurable benefits. Made going big the only choice.
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How we got here:

- 2020 EIGP Grant Solicitation provided focus.
 - Project selected from list of potential projects. Industry partner developed project design
 - Existing expertise of community committee members allowed quick drafting of grant solicitation.
 - Key decision makers had trust/familiarity with process
 - Familiar funding process
 - “Easy sell” for submission of grant application for \$1.25M project: administration, finance, school board all greenlighted within 90-day submission window.
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MGHS Solar Project - Lessons learned

You can move the needle in your district!

- Draw on community expertise
 - Develop partners (community, industrial, NGOs)
 - Start some low-risk projects
 - Build relationships, trust of stakeholders, institutional capacity
 - Learn how to work within the constraints of schools
 - Identify possible projects now so when opportunities arise so you can move quickly
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MGHS Solar project – Where are we now?

- Status:
 - EIGP Grant awarded 2/2021
 - Bond financing secured 4/2021
 - Planned construction 7/2021 slipped to 3/2022 (supply chain disruption)
 - Panels to be energized 5/16/22
- Outreach is essential to meet our goals
 - Publicize:
 - Kick-off video
 - **Ribbon cutting (5/16? You're all invited!)**
 - Press releases,
 - outreach to government and not-profit sustainability partners
 - Presentations, make process and documents available to sustainability partners, public, educators

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MG Sustainability Path

