

Article published Jul 16, 2007

Official: New lights could save Leon over \$200K yearly

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There's more to energy conservation in schools than simply turning off the lights when a room is empty.

The Leon County school district is working on four main projects to make schools more energy efficient, which in turn will save money: fixing structural problems; replacing older air and heating systems with new ones; exchanging old light bulbs with more energy-efficient ones and installing digital-energy control systems.

The district has been looking at ways to be more energy efficient, but administrators are taking an even closer look at energy options since its budget could be getting tighter. However, School Superintendent Jackie Pons said the district is moving forward with its energy-efficiency plans despite looming state budget cuts.

He said it's too soon to tell how much of a hit local schools will take as a result of the reduced revenue, but he didn't want that to stop the overall goals.

"Being an energy-efficient model will be used in the district regardless of what revenue allocations come for the district. We think that these scenarios will save us money in the long term," Pons said.

For example, the district is replacing the 40-watt T-12 fluorescent lamps and magnetic ballasts, which make up 75 percent of the current lights, with 32-watt T-8 lamps and electronic ballasts - a more energy-efficient option for the ceiling.

School Board member Dee Crumpler said the light bulb replacement alone could save between \$210,000 to \$220,000 a year for the district, which in turn could create more jobs for teachers or school resources.

"Just by replacing those things, we're going to save money. It makes sense," Crumpler said. "We need to be as efficient as we can be with the taxpayers' money."

Manny Joanos, a program manager for the school district, said the goal is to reduce the amount electricity the district uses by 10 percent.

The maintenance department measures the amount of energy used by the kilowatts per square foot. The district has been tracking its energy use for more than 25 years. In the past five years, electric costs have increased 80 percent and the kilowatt demand has increased by 15 percent, according to an energy management report by the school district.

One option the district, in conjunction with the Honeywell Corp., is looking into is putting solar lights in school parking lots. The project with Honeywell includes putting four solar lights in the Gretchen Everhart School parking lot to see if it would save money.

If the solar lights reduce energy costs, the district will place lights in other school parking lots.

"We've done a lot, but we have a lot planned. It's a constant effort," said Paul Byrd, assistant superintendent of support services.

Although district administrators feel they are making progress, some residents feel more needs to be done.

Paul Detscher, project leader in the solar project at the Antique Car Museum in Tallahassee - the largest solarized project in the state - said he learned quite a bit about energy and local schools when he ran for a Leon County Commission seat last year. He believes the district needs to do a better job of creating reusable energy.

"They need to move a lot quicker. When you look at states like California and other places, we're way behind," Detscher said.