



NEWS

Giffords lauds ASU solar efforts

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Solar power might seem futuristic, but thousands of panels supplying electricity from atop at Arizona State University buildings show the technology is ready to help the state add jobs and move toward energy independence, U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., said Monday.

"When I'm flying in an airplane, I look down and see all these flat surfaces below me and think one day I'll look down and be excited to see solar," Giffords said.

Giffords visited two parking garage rooftops sporting solar panels set up under a 15-year agreement with CarbonFree Technology. The university can purchase electricity, which for now accounts for a fraction of its overall use, at a fixed rate.

In all, CarbonFree Technology has installed about 9,000 solar panels at ASU. Giffords touted the installations as Arizona's largest solar plant not owned by a utility.

"I think it's important to talk to supporters and developers of solar projects like these ones at ASU, to understand where the industry has been and better understand how we take projects like these and replicate them around the state and country and build on them," she said.

Giffords said the ASU project demonstrates the potential of solar energy to boost the economy.

"We could take all of these laid-off workers and convert them to power America," she said.

Giffords, a member of the House of Science and Technology Committee, has authored legislation dubbed the Solar Technology Roadmap Act. The bill, which has won endorsement from a subcommittee, would require the U.S. Department of Energy to appoint a group of experts to create a long-term plan to guide solar energy research and commercial uses.

She said one of the biggest hurdles is the perception that solar energy is expensive, unreliable and only suitable for limited applications.

"A lot of my colleagues and people I talk to about solar energy say it's not serious energy, but we see with institutions like this that show solar energy can contribute seriously to our state and country," Giffords said.

Bonny Bentzin, ASU's director of campus sustainability practices, said being able to install solar panels on structures is an advantage for the university.

"Before the panels were built this was just an average parking garage," Bentzin said. "Now it's a place with solar panels and a parking garage."

LOCAL SOLAR EFFORTS

Continental School in Green Valley is hammering out an agreement that would put about 19,000 square feet of solar energy panels in the school's parking lot to generate its own electricity.

The deal would make Continental the first school in Arizona to produce 100 percent of its own

energy. The panels could be up by next year.

Under the deal with Kennedy Partners in Phoenix, the \$3.7 million system would be installed on shaded parking structures in the school's parking lot. About \$2.46 million of that would be paid for by federal, state and utility company incentives and rebates. The final numbers have not been worked out, but under this scenario that would leave Continental to pay back \$1.24 million over the next 10 to 12 years. The school would no longer be paying utility costs to a power company and would instead put those payments toward the loan. Continental spends about \$110,000 a year on power.

Sahuarita Unified School District is studying a similar agreement, though is not as far along in the process.

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