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Earthplace makes clean energy upgrade

By JEFF EYDT Hour Staff Writer Published 10:15 am, Wednesday, January 13, 2016



Hour photo / Erik Trautmann Earthplace, A Nature Discovery & Environmental Learning Center, is upgrading the facility to make Earthplace a conservation showcase.

WESTPORT — The nature sanctuary and learning center Earthplace has secured financing and is nearing completion of the second phase of their ambitious enterprise sustainability plan.

This latest upgrade, part of a multi-year effort, positions Earthplace as a regional energy conservation showcase for its 23,000-square-foot facility situated on a 62-acre nature sanctuary on

Woodside Lane in Westport.

"We are very excited about these upgrades to our facility as we look to create an energy conservation showcase," said Tony McDowell, executive director of Earthplace. "This is a win-win-win project for Earthplace, the town and the state."

The first phase was completed in 2012 and focused on improving the energy efficiency of the building by using the first 12kw of solar installation.

The second phase added a further 32kw of solar installation with a LED lighting retrofit and heating system upgrades. These unit upgrades include new rooftop units, economizers, mini-splits, circulation and thermostatic controls.

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The third phase is planned and will likely address water conservation, air circulation and other distributed generation technologies as Earthplace nears its goal of net zero carbon emissions.

"We received state-supported financing for conservation and clean energy upgrades that will produce a lower carbon footprint for years to come. The carbon reduction benefits flow to the town and state as we all strive for net zero emissions by 2050," said McDowell.

Earthplace's ongoing contribution to the community has been its successful "Environmental Learning Series," which is co-produced by The Westport

Green Task Force and presents film screenings and lectures followed by a panel of local experts available to answer questions.

"We would like to hold an event for local commercial property owners who, like us, are keen to reduce their costs and environmental impact and would appreciate ideas on how to go about it,"

said McDowell.

Environmental benefits from the second phase will include a reduction in grid-supplied electrical power of 103,223 kWh/year which represents 65 percent of current usage; a heating oil reduction of 1,742 gallons/year, a carbon footprint reduction of over 40 tons/year; and a particulate emissions reduction of 40 percent.

Designed and facilitated by Mark Robbins of MHR Development, LLC, this ambitious multi-measure plan leverages financing from the Connecticut Green Bank and incentives from several agencies, Eversource Energy, Renewable Energy Credits (Z-RECs) and a power purchase agreement (PPA) for the additional 32kw rooftop mounted solar installation.

These upgrades including the added solar installation were approximately \$300,000. \$178,000 was financed by a state program called Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE). This required engineering audits to establish a baseline and verify forecasts of energy savings to support the loan from the Connecticut Green Bank.

The Earthplace Installation is the first project in the town of Westport financed by the Connecticut Green Bank, a first-in-nation, quasi-public agency that provides loans based on projected energy savings from clean energy projects. The balance of the project expenses were offset by Z-RECs.

The Town of Westport will receive approximately 20 points in connection with its participation in the Clean Energy Communities program because of the C-PACE loan for Earthplace. Points may be redeemed by the community for clean energy assets like electric car charging stations and solar panels.

Earthplace's facilities include indoor and outdoor animal exhibits, a premier water quality lab and a nature museum for children. Earthplace also offers evening Environmental Learning programs for teens and adults, as well as a highly accredited nature-based Preschool and summer camp.

Admission for the museum is \$5 for children over one years old, \$7 per adult and \$5 per senior over 62.

For more information about Earthplace, please visit earthplace.org.

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