

Solar energy powers Mutual Housing communities



Solar Panels at Owendale Mutual Housing Community.

Mutual Housing California develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.

For more than a decade, Mutual Housing California has been “bridging the green divide” by bringing solar power to residents of its multi-family communities in Davis, Woodland and Sacramento.

Today, at the nonprofit’s five communities in Davis, solar panels produce 675,000 kilowatt-hours of energy annually, helping the environment, the residents and the nonprofit.

Tracking software at New Harmony Mutual Housing Community shows that the photovoltaic system has generated 439,928 kwh since installation in 2013. Without the new system, 32,336 barrels of oil would have been needed to produce this much energy, a carbon expenditure that would require 6,151 trees to offset, a news release said.

In one year, the solar power at the other four communities has generated enough energy to save nearly 300,000 pounds of coal or 228 acres of forest from being burned. It would have been too expensive to install solar storage cells, so any energy produced goes back to the grid to the offset the energy used by each community.

“By making our energy footprints smaller, we are creating more sustainable communities in Davis and elsewhere,” said Rachel Iskow, Mutual Housing’s executive director.

Energy use varies among the Mutual Housing communities. At Owendale and Moore Village, residents use about 75 percent of what is produced, while Twin Pines residents use about 89 percent. Any remaining energy is used to power offices, computer labs, laundry rooms and outdoor lighting.

Although upgrading the four existing communities to include solar panels and building a new community, New Harmony, with solar panels cost \$1.3 million, Mutual Housing believes that the investment will pay itself off.

“Adding solar panels helps us in the long run by lowering our nonprofit expenditures,” said Bryan Dove, director of asset management. So far, the new panels have saved \$85,000 a year for residents and nearly \$23,000 for the nonprofit.

To pay for the project, Mutual Housing was able to tap into part of the California Solar Initiative, a program that provides rebates for families and business that install and use solar energy systems. PG&E cooperates with CSI to encourage the addition of photovoltaic panels to affordable multi-family communities.

“For PG&E, it is cheaper to add solar panels to communities than to build new power plants,” said Scott Sarem, CEO of Everyday Energy, a company that designs, develops and installs solar energy systems for housing communities.

Mutual Housing was a great candidate for funding, the news release said, because its communities were built with green, energy-efficient methods, meaning that all possible energy would be conserved. An organization whose buildings were less efficient would be unable to make the best use of the solar power.

“You’re not really addressing the problem if you put solar panels on buildings that are wasting energy,” Dove explained.

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Although Mutual Housing used reserve funds for the difference on most of the installations, the nonprofit also got a \$55,000 loan from the city of Davis for the Owendale community that will be forgiven in a year once the system is proved to work as planned.

“Installing solar energy systems in low-income communities not only helps residents with the cost of living in our city, but it helps the city itself become more environmentally sustainable,” said Robb Davis, mayor pro tem.

“As of now, we do not have an ordinance requiring solar on multi-family units as we do for single-family residences. This makes Mutual Housing a leader, as far as Davis is concerned, in the installation of solar energy production on multi-family residences.”

At some point, Mutual Housing staff hopes to set up monitoring software that tracks energy use in each apartment like it has in its newest community, Spring Lake, in Woodland. Spring Lake is a zero-net-energy development and the first multi-family rental property certified as a Zero Energy Ready Home by the Department of Energy.

For more information, visit www.mutualhousing.com.