



A Gathering Space Fueled by Solar Savings



Photos courtesy of StraightUp Solar

Project Summary

The Normal Township staff wanted to install solar panels at the Activity and Recreation Center (ARC) to go along with other sustainability and cost-saving upgrades they had been making since purchasing the building in 2015. However, they expected it to take several years to gather the capital needed upfront for the project and to hold the bidding process to select a vendor.

The Township learned about Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA), a state program that provides incentives for solar development in income-eligible and environmental justice communities, through the Ecology Action Center, a non-profit in their town of Normal, Illinois, that serves as a grassroots education organization for the ILSFA

program. The ARC, a gathering space for up to 4,500 seniors in the community, is located in an income-eligible community, making it eligible for ILSFA. Through the program, Normal Township is guaranteed to see measurable savings on the ARC's electricity costs and paid no upfront costs for the new rooftop solar project.

Prior to COVID-19, up to 700 seniors visited the ARC each day, "to see their friends, to drink coffee, play cards, play pickleball," explained Rick Lewis, Director of Operations at the ARC. According to Lewis, the ARC shut down its on-site programming in March 2020 due to the pandemic and has since partnered with McLean County and a local hospital to use its facility to host mass vaccination clinics. The electricity cost savings guaranteed by their participation

Project Details

- Solar Companies: Central Road Energy LLC, Balance Solar LLC, and StraightUp Solar
- Estimated savings on electricity costs:*
 - o First year: **\$24,934, or 66.1%**
 - o Total savings: **\$157,406, or 67.5%**
- Eligibility: Income-Eligible Community

**These savings are based on estimated electricity costs. Since electricity rates are expected to rise over time, the ARC's estimated savings also increase over the course of their contract.*

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in ILSFA will allow the Township to further invest in the staff and infrastructure and provide even greater support to the seniors they serve, as the ARC began a phased reopening in May 2021.

The Process

Once Normal Township staff learned about ILSFA, their path to participation was straightforward: they reviewed the list of ILSFA-approved solar companies, referred to as Approved Vendors, and ultimately connected with Central Road Energy LLC, along with StraightUp Solar, an installation company serving their region, and Balance Solar, the project's finance partner. StraightUp Solar worked with their staff to determine that the ARC met ILSFA's eligibility and site suitability requirements.

Sarah Grammer, Normal Township Supervisor, said that having an

"I'm hoping our project is a springboard and does cause a lot of others in the community to want to pursue [solar]."

- Sarah Grammer, Normal Township Supervisor

established list of vetted vendors to choose from made the process much easier. Central Road Energy submitted a project application in the competitive Non-Profit and Public Facilities sub-program and the project was selected and approved in fall 2020.

The Results

The ARC's rooftop solar project was installed in March 2021 and connected to the electricity grid

in April 2021. Now that it's up and running, the center is expected to save almost \$25,000 on electricity costs in the project's first year, and over \$157,000 overall. "That's huge for us. That's money we can further invest in our infrastructure and our staff," added Grammer.

It's also an opportunity for the Normal Township staff to spread the word about solar energy and the environmental and economic benefits it provides, Grammer explained. In addition to non-profits and public facilities, ILSFA also includes programs for income-eligible Illinois renters and homeowners. The Township plans to use the ARC's solar project to educate seniors whose own households may be eligible for the program.

The ARC's new solar project also complements the cost-saving benefits achieved by performing building maintenance and energy upgrades. The ARC was originally an ice-skating rink in the 1980s and had fallen into disrepair when Normal Township purchased the 40,000 square foot building and began large-scale renovations. In addition to replacing the building's roof, installing energy efficient windows, and adding 3,000 square feet of activity space, they're planning a greenspace project to capture stormwater runoff outside, and they recently replaced the building's HVAC system.

"It's kind of exciting to know we're going to be pairing [the HVAC replacement] with the solar project for a much more efficient, earth-friendly system overall. Together, the two things will save the senior center quite a lot over time and will really serve the center well," said Grammer.