

# Oakdale Saves Money While Working to Save the Planet

BY JANET CASS

The City of Oakdale has worked hard for many years to be an environmentally friendly city. It's had an Environmental Management Commission since 1994, and it joined the Minnesota GreenStep Cities program in 2011, just a year after the voluntary initiative started.

In 2015, this city of nearly 29,000 residents won the first-ever Sustainable City Award from the League of Minnesota Cities and GreenStep Cities. The award honors a city for undertaking a project, program, or initiative that helps the city achieve its sustainability goals by implementing one or more of the 29 best practices listed in the GreenStep Cities program.

Oakdale has implemented 18 of them, but it wasn't the number of best practices put into action that garnered the award for this Twin Cities metro suburb. It was results.

## Environmental accomplishments

The city's results include a mix of promoting sustainable practices for developers and others, while also improving energy efficiency at its own facilities.

One example is the Tartan Crossing redevelopment, in which the city promoted mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods. The city created a concept plan and design standards, and provided assistance for the redevelopment by using tax increment financing as well as multiple grants.



Mayor Stan Karwoski (left), Keith Miller, and Jen Hassebroek stand in front of the Tartan Crossing redevelopment, one of Oakdale's environmental accomplishments.

PHOTO BY LAINIE STEFFEN

As part of becoming more energy-efficient, Oakdale reduced its costs for energy consumption and maintenance by using LED technology in newly installed streetlights and all signal lights. Energy-wise improvements to city facilities not only save money for the city, but also help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Gas and electricity costs for the city's facilities, including City Hall and the public works building, also decreased by approximately \$17,000 between 2011 and 2012. This was achieved by improving lighting, insulation, and HVAC equipment at City Hall and by

installing geothermal heating at public works.

Federal funding paid for the HVAC and geothermal projects, which included necessary repairs to both buildings. The HVAC upgrades save the city an estimated \$7,500 per year, while the

geothermal installation saves approximately \$4,200 annually.

Solar panels installed on the roof of City Hall in 2012 are expected to produce approximately 12 percent of the electricity the building uses. They'll save the city an estimated \$5,075 annually, with savings over the life of the panels projected to be nearly \$358,000. The project is expected to pay for itself in about nine years.

Although the cost and installation of the solar panels totaled more than \$300,000, that sum was reduced by nearly 85 percent through Xcel Energy's Solar Rewards program, the state's Made in Minnesota financial incentive, and a federal income tax credit to the city's project partner. The balance will be due during the course of the panels' six-year lease.

## Progress over time

These accomplishments didn't happen overnight. As mentioned earlier, Oakdale has participated in the GreenStep Cities program since 2011, and members of the city's Environmental Management Commission convene an annual workshop at which they refresh their understanding of best practices



Oakdale has reduced its costs for energy consumption and maintenance by using LED technology in all signal lights.

PHOTO BY LAINIE STEFFEN

in sustainability. They also recommit to making their city more environmentally viable by selecting best practices to incorporate into their work plan for the coming year.

The city tracks its progress toward increased sustainability by using indicators such as reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and energy costs. From 2007 to 2012, greenhouse gas emissions were reduced by 9.4 percent in city buildings and facilities and by 17.3 percent in signal lights. During the same time period, Oakdale saved an average \$10,137 annually in energy costs for city facilities.

### Support from the top

Fundamental to Oakdale's success in becoming more sustainable has been commitment and support from elected officials.

"We've noticed that seems to be where many cities get stuck in attempting to implement such programs," says Senior Community Development Specialist Jen Hassebroek. "They may not have the staff time or expertise to complete a project, and may not receive the support necessary to remove those barriers."

Mayor Stan Karwoski praises the Environmental Management Commission "for developing and following through with an effective plan resulting in the Sustainable City Award. This reflects how talented our citizens are and how receptive our City Council is to becoming sustainable. [It's] meaningful because it represents ongoing sustainability."

"Winning the inaugural Sustainable City Award was a well-deserved recognition for the City Council and Environmental Management Commission's long-standing commitment to environmental issues in the city," Hassebroek adds. "Both the City Council and the Commission have embraced making Oakdale more sustainable for quite some time, and with the addition of the GreenStep Cities framework to work from, have been able to make sure the city's operations adhere to accepted best practices."

To that end, Oakdale created its Generation Green Sustainability Plan, which is based on the GreenStep Cities program and provides the city with a framework to follow as it works to create a sustainable community with a high quality of life.



Solar panels were installed on the roof of City Hall in 2012.

### What's next

The next phase in implementing that plan will have the city working more closely with commercial and industrial properties to facilitate energy improvements in its commercial building stock, Hassebroek says.

"It was important to the City Council and the Environmental Management Commission that Oakdale be an example of what good sustainability practices look like before we asked our businesses and residents to do the same," she explains. "We want to be a leader that our community can look to, both for inspiration and for examples of projects that can be energy-efficient and cost-effective."

To help foster citywide sustainability, Oakdale collaborated with the St. Paul Port Authority to provide low-interest financing to businesses for energy improvement projects. The port authority does this through a program called PACE, or Property Assessed Clean Energy, in which property owners take measures to achieve energy savings and receive 100 percent financing, repaid as a property tax assessment for up to 20 years.

Business owners aren't the only ones being encouraged by the city to think sustainably. Homeowners and the general public are, too, as illustrated by Oakdale's Spring 2016 newsletter. It includes simple suggestions for conserving water and other resources.

### Increasing solar energy

Meanwhile, the city continues its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in part by considering greater solar energy use.

"Oakdale was an early mover in setting a greenhouse gas reduction goal for our city," says Keith Miller, chair of the Environmental Management Commission. "Time is a critical factor in reducing greenhouse gases. By reducing 1 ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2007, the cumulative reduction by 2012 is 5 tons. Early action to address climate change is important."



Mayor Karwoski says that because rooftop space for solar panels on city buildings is limited, city staff is considering participating in community solar gardens as a way to expand its commitment to using responsibly sourced electricity.

"Our City Council is open-minded enough to give careful consideration to solar power technologies that would produce measurable savings with little financial risk," Karwoski says.

### Advice for other cities

Miller's advice for a city considering participating in the GreenStep Cities program? "I highly recommend it," he says.

The program's 29 best practices are a great way to look for opportunities for environmental improvements in your city, he adds. Cities can choose which best practices will have the greatest impact on improving their sustainability.

"After aligning best practice priorities with other city initiatives, the city can evaluate actions listed in the program to determine which ones are most critical and achievable," Miller says. "[The GreenStep Cities] program's guidance is invaluable."  

Janet Cass is a St. Paul-based freelance writer.

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