

Solar energy class brightens job prospects in emerging field

By Toby Sells

Tuesday, January 25, 2011

Clouds blotted Monday's sky, but 29 students at the University of Memphis thought mainly about the sun and how to capture it.

These students began what will be a weeklong course from the Tennessee Solar Institute to learn the basics of solar equipment design and installation.

The class is a part of the \$62.5 million Volunteer State Solar Initiative devised by former governor Phil Bredesen and paid for with funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. One of the goals of the initiative is to help train Tennesseans for jobs in the emerging field of solar energy production and installation.

The class in Memphis drew students mainly from Shelby County, but also some from East and Middle Tennessee. Course instructor Earl Pomeroy, a manufacturing consultant for the solar institute, said he expected only 20 students.

The classes began, Pomeroy said, with units on basic electricity and mathematics. The courses will progress through the week

to include the basics of solar energy and solar equipment design.

"(The classes) are important for work force development and also to make more apparent the solar industry throughout the state and generate jobs as they become available," Pomeroy said.

The program will end Saturday with a test to assemble a small solar system, "boot it up, produce some electricity and turn some lights on." Once the students graduate, they

will be prepared for jobs as solar equipment installers, or in sales with solar companies or financial institutions to determine the merit and value of a solar project.

Jimmie Tucker, a principal of Downtown's Self Tucker Architects Inc., said he hopes the class will help him incorporate solar electricity into the development of a 400-unit public-housing facility at Cleaborn Homes.

"We're trying to understand the overall return you can get by incorporating the panels into the project," Tucker said. "Some of the costs of the panels are coming down. We're closing the gap, but it's still a challenge."

George Graham and his wife, Will, took the class to help people like Tucker attract more solar projects to Memphis.

Graham is an assistant city attorney in Memphis' Housing and Community Development department. He said his boss, Robert Lipscomb, returned from a conference "embarrassed" at how far Memphis was behind the solar curve.

"When he made that comment, I knew I needed to enhance my understanding of (solar energy projects)," Graham said.

The solar course was taught three times in the fall semester in Knoxville, Spring Hill and Jackson. Two more courses are in the works for the spring semester, though the details have not been finalized.

The course was designed by J.K. Inabinet, an adjunct professor at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville.

"There's an adequate work force for the demand (for solar energy) right now in Tennessee," Inabinet said. "The No. 1 drawback to putting more systems in is the expense, and the only thing that will bring the expense down is to put more systems in. But the incentives we're getting from the government, that's a biggie."

-- Toby Sells: 529-2742

Tennessee Solar Institute

What: Solar Photovoltaic Technology Training Course

When: Through Saturday

Where: University of Memphis

Registration: Course is closed, but new courses to be announced in spring

Details: solar.tennessee.edu



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