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Newsroom

Georgia Southern University

Georgia Southern Alumnus spearheads a solar farm initiative

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Randy Smith

Working with solar energy has been a dream for alumnus Randy Smith ('88) since a young age, and soon he'll be able to make that dream a reality with the help of two innovative companies, Inman Solar and Georgia Power Company.

Smith, a science and math teacher at Darlington School in Rome, Georgia, has begun development of a new five-acre solar farm on Darlington's campus.

"My colleague, Mike Hudson, and I received a $25,000 grant to renovate our school greenhouse and develop a horticultural program at Darlington School," said Smith. "My desire was to incorporate a couple of solar panels on the greenhouse."

With this idea in mind, Smith and his co-worker attended an energy conference in Atlanta sponsored by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE). There, they connected with Inman Solar.

"At the conference, we were able to connect with a few solar development companies and discuss possibilities," Smith said. "After talking with Inman Solar, Brion Fitzpatrick, project developer, came to our campus for a site visit to evaluate our potential. The rest is history."

Inman Solar and Smith worked together to submit an application to Georgia Power's popular Advanced Solar Initiative program, and Georgia Power selected their project through a lottery process and awarded them a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA).

This project proposal was presented to school administration as not only an educational opportunity for students in the classroom, but a way to connect with the students through a hands-on approach to the valuable life skills they are taught at Darlington.

Darlington head of school, Brent Bell, supported Smith in this endeavor. The project was turned over to a Board of Trustees for a vote, and it passed and was met with much praise.

From there, it went through the Rome-Floyd County Planning Commission and the Rome City Commission. The project passed again with flying colors.

Smith recounted, "This process required a lot of faith, patience and perseverance. Once one hurdle was crossed, a new hurdle would present itself. We had to keep moving forward when an obstacle or challenge presented itself."

Inman Solar signed a 25-year lease on the parcel of land that brings nearly $900,000 in capital investment to the school property. All of this was accomplished at no cost to the school. Inman will sell all the energy and all the environmental attributes* back to Georgia Power while paying Darlington for the land they use.

The Darlington solar farm not only helps the school and community, but is good for character education. It will educate students, help them become better global citizens and encourage them to consider implementing alternative energy possibilities in the future, Smith said. Students and faculty will have the chance to get an in-depth look at how solar power works through access to the project's internet production monitor, which will serve as a living laboratory.

Thanks to Smith's hard work, this solar farm will reduce more than 800 tons of carbon dioxide per year. That is the same as powering up more than 200 residential properties in the area for an entire year.

These numbers can only grow as Smith looks toward expansion in the future.

"I am currently seeking other opportunities to incorporate alternative energy initiatives on campus," Smith said. "We are in the information gathering phase to consider other solar, wind and other sources of revenue generation through creative use of land holdings. I am very excited about the potential."

Construction, which begins on August 22, will take about six to eight weeks to complete before energy can be fed into the grid.

An artist's rendering of what the completed solar farm at Darlington School will look like.

"It is pretty amazing to think that our $50 conference fee turned into one of the largest green energy initiatives for an independent school in Georgia," concluded Smith.

** Note: Under the PPA, the energy produced by this facility is sold to Georgia Power, who retains ownership of all RECs, environmental attributes, capacity and electrical products produced from the facility.*