

Wednesday, Nov. 4, 2009

EPA recognizes four area green schools

by Bradford Pearson | Staff Writer

Four county private schools were recently honored by the Environmental Protection Agency for their use of renewable energy.

Bullis School in Potomac, Norwood School in Bethesda, Green Acres School in Rockville, and Evergreen School in Wheaton were all named by the EPA's Green Power Partnership to the "Top 20 K-12 Schools" list, which ranked the schools based on their green power consumption.

Green power is electricity that is generated from renewable natural resources—including wind, geothermal and solar energy, and bio-gas—instead of fossil fuels.

All four schools purchase renewable energy certificates from Rockville-based Clean Currents, a clean energy broker which sells energy through “renewable energy credits.” One renewable energy credit represents one megawatt hour of alternative energy that is released into the power grid, said Gary Skulnik, president of Clean Currents.

The company processes its energy using wind power.

Bullis School was the highest ranked of the four area schools, coming in fourth on the list for buying the most renewable energy certificates.

"We're delighted to be represented there," Bullis Head of School Tom Farquhar said. "We did this because it's the right thing to do, but it's just a little part of what we do here."

Farquhar added that the school will soon add a set of photovoltaic cells to the school's roofs, to harness solar energy.

The cost for each school varies with the contract they created with Clean Currents, school officials said. Some schools pay about the same as they would for regular energy, while others, including Bullis, pay more. Farquhar said the cost of the green power for his school was about \$17,000 more than regular energy would be.

This is the first year for the EPA's school list, said Blaine Collison, program director for the Green Power Partnership. It also ranks Fortune 500 companies, colleges and universities, and local governments.

Montgomery County government came in seventh place in the local government ranking.

"One of the interesting things we've found is that there is some one-upsmanship here," Collison said. "The stakeholders and companies see where they fall, then want to do better next year."

Collison said he hopes that the schools will follow that same trend. The Austin Independent School District in Texas came in first in the inaugural rankings, using 65,600,000 kilowatt-hours of green power in the past year.

Green Acres School in Rockville switched to green power in May 2008. The switch was to correlate the school's environmental stewardship goals with its energy consumption, Head of School Neal Brown said. According to the EPA, Green Acres' purchase of more than 700,000 kilowatt-hours is the equivalent amount of electricity it would take to power more than 100 homes for a year.

"It gives people a great sense of pride," Brown said. "We have a banner that hangs outside the school telling people about it."

Each of the four schools is now 100 percent run by wind power, though none have physical wind turbines on their property.

"This is a signature program at our school," said Evergreen School Head of School Marcia Jacques. "Our students are the future of this world and they need to really learn about what it's going to take to care for it."