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Airport seeks bids for solar energy project

Measure could save the airport a lot of money in energy costs

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SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MOUNT VERNON — Mount Vernon Outland Airport is moving forward on a solar energy project that could reduce the airport's power bill by 60 to 65%, said Airport Director Chris Collins.

At the June 11 Mount Vernon Airport Authority Board of Commissioners meeting, the board gave Collins permission to put an official specification together and go out for bids on the solar project. Specifically, the initiative would involve installing solar panels on the first row of T hangars at the airport. These hangars were rehabilitated about five years ago and there are new metal roof panels on the buildings.

Collins said that airport officials have investigated solar a couple

times in the past, but opted not to pursue it. Now, however, they have decided to revisit the issue because of declining tax revenues.

"We've looked at (solar) twice previously and the bottom line is, we've just gotten wiser about how it works, where the incentives come from and how incentives flow back into a governmental entity," Collins said. "All of those things caused us to look at it a third time."

In the current 2024-2025 airport budget, the Personal Property Replacement Tax (PPRT) line item was

down by 27% from the prior year and Collins said that he's worried that reduction might be a trend which could significantly impact the airport's revenues going forward.

PPRT is a 2.5% tax on corporations on their net Illinois income. Up until the pandemic, the airport would usually receive about \$200,000 in annual revenue from this tax. However, the revenue amount went up significantly post-pandemic and reached \$500,000 a few years ago. Last year, though, it went down to \$395,000 and experts have indicated

to Collins that PPRT totals are probably headed back down to pre-pandemic levels.

"And so that's forcing me to look for additional revenues and cost-saving measures," Collins said. "We want to be prepared for things like this, you want to be proactive and not reactive. So looking at the expense side of your budget, you don't have a lot of wriggle room. ... But with all the incentives being offered for green energy, you're kind of forced to look at it."

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Collins said that the energy bill for the terminal building alone at the airport was \$52,000 last year. The airport does not have the money to own a full-blown solar facility that could provide all the energy for the airport. However, the airport could do a smaller scale solar energy project that could shave 60 to 65% off of that energy bill, Collins said. Such a project could be incentivized by the government for up to 75% of the cost, so it's worth taking a look at, Collins said.

The Airport Board on June 11 also approved the tentative 2024-2025 budget, which will be available for public view for a few months before it's formally adopted. In that budget, the airport is doing okay finance-wise but Collins said that he is concerned there could be an issue in the years to come with the declining PPRT revenue. That is why the solar project is important.

"These are measures (that) we need to start looking out for," Collins said, later adding, "It's forcing us to look into this a little more, try to find some savings, cut some costs and get some additional revenue."

Collins pointed out that the

airport is not raising property taxes to deal with this issue. The tentative 2024-2025 budget once again shows a frozen tax levy. This is the ninth year in a row that the airport has had a frozen tax levy, Collins said. The budget, however, does include a 5% increase in rent across the board for all tenants, which are people who use the airport for storing planes and renting facilities.

"It's not an easy decision to make," Collins said of the rent increase. "It's only the third time in my (20-year) tenure I've had to do that, but sometimes you have to do that to live within your means. We try to be as self-sustaining as possible. We can't do it without the property tax (that) we collect, but we want to try to do our best to be fiscally prudent with the tax funds (that) we do receive and try to live within our means."

Collins said that it will likely take a few months to get bids on the solar panels. Once bids are received, they will be brought back to the Airport Board for evaluation and approval.

Also on June 11, Collins informed the board that Mount Vernon Airport has been selected to be the race terminus site (or finish line) for the 2026 Air Race Classic. This event is a large-scale national women's air race.

Previously, Mount Vernon Airport hosted one of the stops for this race in 2022. That year, Mount Vernon Airport was selected as the "best stop" for the race. This is likely why the local airport was chosen to be the race terminus for 2026, Collins said. Being the starting point or terminus site of the race is a big deal, because all of the race teams, race officials and administrators have to be there for the start and the finish of the race. That means more people coming to town and getting hotel rooms and eating at restaurants, Collins said.

According to Collins, the economic impact for a host city of the starting point or terminus of this race is about \$220,000.

"So we're very excited about that," Collins said.

The 2026 Air Race Classic will be held from June 23 to 26 that year. This year's race starts on June 18 at Southern Illinois Airport in Carbondale.

In addition on June 18, the Airport Board discussed project updates.

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