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## Sunny prospects for one Eden Prairie company

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Newly formed Westwood Renewables in Eden Prairie offers a look into the reality of what many policy-makers describe as the “green-collar” jobs of the future.

There has been much talk of how a transition to a green energy economy could help pull the United States out of recession. A good chunk of the federal economic stimulus legislation passed early this year puts a focus on kick-starting renewable energy industry – through billions in investment, rebates and tax incentives. Those at Westwood Renewables present a realistic assessment of the challenges within the solar power industry while also maintaining an optimistic outlook on the opportunities ahead.

“It is a very exciting time,” noted Westwood Principal Dwight Jelle.

Jelle has good reason to be excited – Westwood Renewables is the recipient of a \$2 million grant from Xcel Energy to design what will be the largest photovoltaic (or solar energy) system in the state. The project is estimated to produce five times more power than any solar system in Minnesota that has been built today, said Jelle. St. John’s University in Collegeville is the proposed site of the project.

It’s an example of a utility- style application of solar in Minnesota, “really to prove that it can be done,” noted General Manager Nathan Franzen.

Proving Minnesota’s worth in terms of solar resources is but one of the unique challenges those at the company are looking to take on.

Next steps

Westwood Renewables, 7699 Anagram Drive, formed this year as a partnership between Westwood Professional Services and Best Power International (BPI). BPI’s founder, Mario Monesterio, now heads up Westwood Renewables with Jelle, who is president of Westwood Professional Services and chief manager of Westwood Renewables.

Monesterio has been an expert in the solar industry for almost 30 years while Westwood Professional Services (which provides consulting services for energy and land development projects) has been in the wind energy business since 1997.

Westwood Renewables focuses on design and project development of PV (photovoltaic) systems for the Midwest region. That could include anything from the planned 400-kilowatt plant for Xcel, to designing systems for a school in St. Joseph or just adding PV systems to a person’s home.

Along with designing the photovoltaic systems, much of what the company offers is a process that

educates and navigates clients through the byzantine system of incentives and tax breaks set up to encourage solar energy use. Westwood starts off with an initial site assessment – preparing a report about a site’s solar or wind resource potential. Once they finish that evaluation, then the client has better understanding of options, noted Monesterio.

Westwood walks a client through all the tax incentives, the rebate programs, how the interconnection process works with their utility, and then design the systems, noted Franzen.

Jelle said that the company provides unique product knowledge from a cold weather and northern climate standpoint.

“Mario’s experience really gives us a huge leg up on that,” said Jelle.

A big part of the education the company provides works to get past the misconceptions related to Minnesota’s solar power potential.

Jelle noted that though Germany by far outstrips the worldwide use of solar power, Minnesota’s resource is 30 percent better than Germany’s solar resources. In fact Minnesota is about equal to Spain, he added.

According to Westwood Renewables’ Web site, “Contrary to popular belief, solar panels do not need heat or bright sunlight to operate – a cold, overcast day can still produce power through a Photovoltaic (PV) or solar thermal array.”

“There are a lot of reasons why solar might work better here than in California as far as dust and cold temperatures,” said Jelle.

According to a report on Minnesota 2020 (a nonpartisan think-tank), Minneapolis has more solar energy potential than Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York, Portland or Seattle.  
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According to Monesterio, another challenge for their industry is the issue of inconsistencies within the channels that companies would go through to implement projects.

States may have incentive programs in place; however programs may run out of funds depending

on the whims and funding processes of state governments.

“That creates this up and down cycle that businesses can’t maintain,” noted Monesterio.

Another challenge he sees for the industry is training a qualified workforce: To bring about those much touted “green collar jobs,” takes a push for education.

If we look at the projected implementation of renewable technologies, “we certainly have to ante up on our workforce,” Monesterio said.

There is much excitement about renewable energy “but there’s definitely a lag on the financing side,” noted Jelle.

That may change as incentives from the federal government pull through. According to Jelle, one of the biggest incentives through the stimulus package was a U.S. Treasury grant, where solar projects are eligible for a grant “equal to 30 percent of the basis of the property for solar energy,” according to the Department of Energy.

“They expect to be accepting applications for that now in August, which is a huge deal,” said Jelle.

Franzen said another bright spot is that on the federal side, they’ve extended the tax incentives for solar energy until 2016.

On the state level “we’ve seen a lot of good things get passed at the Legislature this past year,” said Franzen.

The new rules for LEED (green building standards) have a stronger component for on-site energy generation, noted Franzen. As part of that, Westwood is seeing a lot of corporate clients that want to go green.

“We see that as a strong market in the future.”

Monesterio said they all find a lot of rewards in going through a process and delivering real answers to questions for clients who have been looking at these issues.

It’s rewarding letting them know “what the real options are for them and then helping them achieve that,” he said.

When asked if the high hopes of a green tech future are justified, Jelle said about the only choice America’s going to have for the next economy is going to be that energy economy.

“I think it’s a great opportunity to solve a lot of the problems that we’ve had in the past and put people back to work.”

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