

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Thinking solar

Unprecedented droughts and floods — from China to Pakistan to the American West — are unrelenting reminders that climate change is here, and will only get worse, and our young people will face the brunt of it.

There are things we can do in Pottstown to mitigate climate change.

In January 2018, Pottstown Borough Council and the Pottstown School District passed a joint sustainability plan.

The 128-page document (which can be downloaded from the borough website) contains 39 specific actions we could take.

A few have been implemented, such as bike lanes and the installation of LED street lights, an on-going project.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

But most have not.

Earlier this month, the school district facilities consultant, O&S, recommended Pottstown should *quadruple* its annual facilities budget from an average of \$722,000 since 2015 to \$3 million in the upcoming school year.

That's a lot of money.

Major investments in our nine buildings should make them more environmentally responsible as well as extend their lifespans.

Here's one example: Although carbon dioxide is the chief greenhouse gas, the most potent greenhouse gas is refrigerants found in refrigerators, supermarket cases, and air conditioners.

They are also found in HVAC systems. As Pottstown upgrades its HVAC system at the high school this fall, it will replace existing refrigerants with newly developed substitutes that are environmentally benign. That's a step forward.

Unfortunately, the district passed up a golden opportunity to install geothermal heating and cooling systems in its four elementary schools when they were renovated in 2012-2014.

Geothermal systems run a loop of pipes underground in a field outside the building and use the earth as a heat source in the winter and a heat sink in the summer.

They are far more energy efficient

than any other system, and they don't use any gas or oil.

In the winter of 2010, a group of Pottstown school directors visited the Upper Providence Elementary School in the Spring-Ford School District to see its geothermal system. Spring-Ford found it was 20 percent less costly to operate than a conventional system.

But Pottstown school administrators killed the idea because it was less trouble to install conventional HVAC.

Interestingly, Spring-Ford was recognized earlier this year as the only "Green Ribbon" school district in Pennsylvania for its efforts to reduce the environmental impact of its buildings and provide sustainability education.

Here in Pottstown, O&S will conduct a top-to-bottom assessment of our facilities. One thing we should consider is rooftop solar panels.

According to a clean energy non-profit, Generation180, nearly one in ten K-12 public and private schools nationwide are now using solar energy.

Typically, school districts allow third party companies to pay for solar systems upfront, along with installation, operation and maintenance.

In return for housing the system, schools buy electricity at a reduced rate. This arrangement has been used to pay for nearly 90 percent of the existing solar capacity at American schools.

Now is a good time for O&S to do a feasibility study for Pottstown.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.



ROOFTOP SOLAR PANELS — A growing number of school districts, including the Colonial School District in Montgomery County, above, and our neighbor, Phoenixville, have installed solar cells on the rooftops of their schools to provide energy to power their schools.