

Soaring Ahead *on the Winds of Change*



By Julia Carey

As the cold winds of economic change blow through the nation, a group of people on the edge of Freeport, Ill., just keep coming up with career-building opportunities. This time, they're harnessing talented minds, skilled hands, and the wind.

Highland Community College (HCC) has become adept at taking the pulse of local businesses and offering programs that produce skilled graduates ready to work where they're needed. Its ongoing partnership with FHN, for example, resulted in the only associate degree evening nursing program in the tri-state area, and eventually sparked the new Ray and Betty Stamm Health Science Nursing Wing.

Now, HCC has a waiting list of students who want to be part of a program that's the first of its kind in Illinois, offering a two-year associate's degree for Wind Turbine Technicians. Approved in April 2008, the program enrolled its first 16 students last fall and the college has broken ground on a facility dedicated to it. The whole program came together quickly, with the right mix of skills, collegiality and vision between the college and

EcoEnergy LLC, developer of the EcoGrove Project, a new wind project in northwestern Stephenson County.

The EcoGrove Project represents a \$200 million investment in the community – in the first phase alone – with the installation of 67 turbines in the county. Against the backdrop of a worldwide shortage of skilled wind turbine technicians, and while working with Highland Agriculture and Economics Instructor Bart Macomber, during the land acquisition phase, an idea began to percolate at EcoEnergy.

"President of EcoEnergy Shawn Gaffney asked me to get involved with Highland Community College," explains David Vrtol, Illinois-Iowa Wind Project manager for EcoEnergy. "It was Shawn's idea to implement a wind tech program. That was a dream of his. So I became engaged with (Dean of Business and Technology) Scott Anderson and (Electronics Instructor) Steve Gellings.

"We worked for a good year on curriculum. We traveled the country, visited other tech schools that had programs in place and quickly realized this was a great fit for Stephenson County



Scott Anderson, Dean of Business and Technology at HCC

and the State of Illinois. We just sat down and got very serious about it. We're very pleased to say that, for the next year, we have a waiting list for the program already."

While EcoEnergy expects its first phase may generate 10 jobs locally, demand is already high for Highland students in the program, none of whom will graduate with an associate's degree until May 2010.

"We were only about a month-and-a-half into the start of our class when we had recruiters at our door wanting to take our people now, which shows you how the industry is hurting," Anderson says. Some students may have the opportunity to spend the summer overseas on internships with B9 Energy, in the United Kingdom, because the program has also raised international interest.

Initially, the Highland program was designed to accept 16 students in the first year, and a second group of 16 in the following year, but Highland plans to accept 20 of the 40 applicants to begin classes in Fall 2009.

The new Wind Turbine Technician Training Center will house two classrooms and two labs within its 5,500 square feet.

The first-year class has had its share of hands-on training, with Vrtol and Gellings leading the way. The group climbed up a 300-foot wind tower at the Mendota Wind Farm in rural Lee County shortly after classes began. In addition to his job



Scott Anderson, Dave Vrtol and Steve Gellings (front row) with HCC's first class of Wind Turbine Technician students.



A student climbs the windmill.

at EcoEnergy, Vrtol teaches two courses in the technician program: Wind Turbine Technician I and Wind Mechanical Systems.

EcoEnergy's commitment has been extensive, but Anderson notes two other companies have jumped in to assist, as well. Rockford-based Greenlee Textron, Inc., plans to outfit the training lab with tools and supplies. And, ifm efector, inc. has donated tools.

Once the students graduate, they'll have the skills to work in a number of positions, since their coursework covers mechanics, hydraulics, electricity, meteorology and computers, all critical to wind turbine operation or site planning.

"It's a great field to be in, right now," says Vrtol, "because the curve is no longer at a slant going up. It's going straight up, and it will stay straight up for a number of years, which is very encouraging. When these students graduate, they will be ready to jump right in and work, without a lot of on-the-job training."

"We've heard stories about people who have been hired to do this, but they weren't properly trained or prepared for the job, and they got part way up the tower and then realized heights were going to be an issue," says Gellings. "Sometimes you have people who are working on very expensive equipment, but they haven't been fully trained on it, so that can lead to some issues, too. You just don't have as much profitability if you're undoing work, or trying to look for more expertise to get the job done."

While the wind turbine program is new to Highland, working with area companies is not. In fact, Anderson is part of the family at many area businesses, having taught customized courses in offices and on shop floors to accommodate changing shifts as

Just the Windy Facts

- An Illinois First: Associate of Applied Science Degree program for Wind Turbine Technician
- Also offered: Wind Turbine Technician Certificate, which can be completed in 1.5 years

Phase 1 of the EcoEnergy project:

- \$200 million investment
- 67 turbines
- Installation scheduled for completion in March
- "Commissioning" begins after installation, connecting each turbine to the electrical grid and making it operational
- Each turbine can generate enough electricity to power 400-650 homes each year. (Do the math. On the low side $67 \times 400 = 26,800$ homes)
- EcoEnergy sells its electricity to ComEd, which puts it into the electrical grid and sends it where it's needed, so that doesn't mean the energy generated in Stephenson county will necessarily be used locally.

Next Phases of EcoEnergy Project:

- Two more phases are scheduled if all goes as planned
- Phases 2 and 3 will likely be as large as Phase 1
- Phase 2 is scheduled to begin in 2010

early as 6 a.m. or as late as 10 p.m.

"We work very hard with places like Honeywell, Sauer-Danfoss and others to help train their folks," Anderson says. "So, we've been, as a college, pretty well connected to a lot of the area manufacturing facilities."

It's one of those rare instances where it seems everyone walks away with a win. The college meets its mission by providing exciting new courses that generate employees who are ready to work in growing fields. Employers find the talented people they need. And the energy that spins through each conversation is hard to contain.

"Working with EcoEnergy and other partners in this kind of a program, to get in on the ground floor of something that is emerging, is very exciting for us," says Highland President Joe Kanosky, PhD. "Without that partnership of the industry and the opportunities there, we wouldn't be able to do this." ■



Steve Gellings peeks out from a windmill door.

