

"Fieldhouse aims at net-zero energy"  
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By BOB AUDETTE, Reformer Staff

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BRATTLEBORO -- As befits a school that is dedicated to keeping its students involved in every aspect of their education, more than 200 of them grabbed shovels and helped to break ground for Putney School's future fieldhouse.

Just as the school and its students are unique, this is no typical field house either. When completed, it will be the first net-zero energy building on any educational campus in New England, said Don Cuerdon, Putney School's director of communications.

A net zero-energy building relies on efficiency to reduce energy needs and gets the balance of its energy from renewables.

The 15,000-square-foot building will house a basketball court, weight room, yoga studio, ski waxing room, equipment storage, locker rooms and a space for social gatherings, designed and finished by the school's current students. Currently, many of those activities happen on the second floor of the school's farm building.

To achieve its net-zero status, the building will rely on a solar hot water heater in the summer, state-of-the-art insulation, automatic light controls and an air-to-air heat exchange pump powered by sun-tracking photovoltaic cells.

In addition, the building will have composting toilets and rain water management systems.

While during the winter the building will need to draw power from Vermont's energy grid, in the summer it will push more electricity back into the grid than it uses, balancing out its wintertime usage.

"This will be a living classroom of environmental sustainability," said Matthew Lorentzen, the chairman of the school's board of trustees.

Administrators, students and the architectural firm worked together, he said, "to create a truly collaborative design a collective vision of responsible living."

The project was designed by William Maclay Architects and Planners of Waitsfield, which proposed three versions for the board of trustees consideration -- micro-load, carbon neutral and net-zero. The field house is being built by DEW Construction Corp., of Williston, which also built the Huseby House dormitory and Michael S. Currier Center building.

Although the net-zero option was the most expensive of the three choices -- at \$6.6 million -- over time the estimated savings in energy costs will more than offset the increased price of the building, said Cuerdon.

The fieldhouse fits right into the school's mission, he added.

"Our founder, Carmelita Hinton, said we should play as hard as we work."

That sentiment was echoed by senior Bronwyn Maloney.

"This building will help keep people happy and healthy," she said, adding the fieldhouse will help students to battle seasonal affective disorder in the dark days of winter.

Along with being a net-zero building, the fieldhouse will also serve as a working example of what can be done to mitigate pollution and energy waste, said Cuerdon. It is the board of trustees' hope that people will visit the campus just to get a look at the new building and use it as a template for other buildings around the country.

"The board had the vision of what this building could be and what it stands for," said school director Emily Jones.

Students and administrators took on the challenge to create a net-zero facility and succeeded, said Sven Huseby, a former school director. But what was most important was the current students' legacy, which will be passed on to future generations of Putney School students.

"We can make a difference by every choice we make," he said.

Gov. James Douglas was on hand to help turn the soil during Saturday's groundbreaking ceremony.

The building is another example of Vermont's leadership in energy conservation and environmental stewardship, he said, adding three state buildings rely on geothermal energy and 31 schools in Vermont use wood chip boilers for heat and hot water.

In addition, Vermont has the cleanest air of any state in the Northeast, has less reliance on fossil fuel for its energy supply than any other state in the nation and is able to raise money for its coffers by selling carbon credits on the energy market.

"Putney School's commitment to this strategy is consistent with that set of values," said Douglas.

The building's construction is being paid for by donations from alumni and relatives of alumni, said Cuerdon.

Eighty-two donors ponied up \$4.6 million for the project, said Lorentzen, but another \$2 million is still needed, part of which will go into an endowment intended to maintain the facility.

Work is scheduled to begin Oct. 20 and should be finished by August or September of 2009, said Randy Smith, the school's chief financial officer.

Bob Audette can be reached at [raudette@reformer.com](mailto:raudette@reformer.com) or 802-254-2311, ext. 273.