



PHOTO COURTESY CLARKSVILLE CONNECTED UTILITIES

Clarksville is home to the state's largest municipal solar power plant, which now powers all city-owned buildings, saving Clarksville an estimated \$500,000 a year.

Sustainable communities: Best practices from the Natural State

By Dylan Edgell

Since 1995, the official nickname of Arkansas has been the Natural State, which appropriately describes its natural beauty from the Delta to the Ozark Mountains. Protecting this natural beauty and our environment has become an increased focus for local governments, and communities across the state have made a commitment to keep Arkansas natural. Going green not only serves the purpose of protecting our environment but often proves to be economically beneficial. Clarksville and Fayetteville are two cities of many in Arkansas that are taking action to save money and the planet.

Solar powered cities

When thinking about sustainable communities, you might first look at how your city gets its power. Last year, Clarksville became the first Arkansas city to fully power its city buildings via solar energy. According to the International Energy Agency, solar power became the cheapest form of energy production in 2020, so for Clarksville the move made economic sense.

Clarksville partnered with Scenic Hill Solar and opened its first 6.5-megawatt solar plant in 2018. In 2020, the city completed its second solar plant that provided enough additional energy to close the gap,

allowing Clarksville city buildings to run on 100-percent solar power.

According to Clarksville Connected Utilities, the estimated cost savings from switching to solar energy will be \$500,000 annually, and the money freed up in the city budget could be devoted to other projects such as infrastructure improvements and fiber-optic expansion. This move also offers an estimated \$5 million in future economic development opportunities to the city of Clarksville and provides a clean-energy option to businesses looking to meet their sustainability goals.

The city of Clarksville's economic developer, Steve Houserman, sees this move as a proud achievement for his community that can be replicated by others. "Clarksville is a city that always punches above its weight," Houserman said. "In order to remain competitive in the 21st century, we seized on opportunities that lead to economic growth and prosperity within our community. Securing our energy independence with a municipally-owned solar plant is not only a down payment toward our future selves, but a shining example for the rest of 'Small Town America' to follow."

Not only are the solar plants economically beneficial to Clarksville, but they are also expected to reduce carbon emissions from energy consumption by over

300,000 metric tons over the next 30 years. As seen with many sustainability projects, environmental and economic benefits are not mutually exclusive.

Sustainability goals

In Fayetteville, city leadership has taken steps to consider the environmental footprint of all city activities. Since 2016, Fayetteville has provided an annual sustainability report card to share their progress on goals in seven categories, including the built environment, natural systems, climate and energy, economy and jobs, equity and empowerment, health and safety, and education, arts and community. In 2017, the city council passed a resolution to support an energy action plan that created additional sustainability goals. The following year, the city partnered with Ozarks Electric Cooperative and Today's Power, Inc. to construct solar arrays to move their clean energy usage from 16 percent to 72 percent.

These efforts resulted in Fayetteville being recognized as an "A-List City" for leading on environmental performance by the Carbon Disclosure Project. Fayetteville Mayor Lioneld Jordan was also selected as one of 12 mayors across the county to receive the Climate Protection Award from the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Solving a complex issue like climate change presents opportunities for growth, Jordan said. "Climate change poses a very serious threat but also a significant economic opportunity for our city and our nation. Fayetteville is committed to working with leaders of other cities, states, universities and businesses to combat climate change by supporting a low-carbon economy and creating good jobs in energy efficiency and renewable energy."

Sustaining your community

Going green can make your community sustainable in more ways than one. Protecting the natural beauty of Arkansas allows future generations to enjoy the outdoors, and the cost savings of these sustainability measures help to ensure that these communities will remain financially secure. Keeping the Natural State natural requires an intentional effort by community leaders, and the positive outcomes will be felt for years to come.



Dylan Edgell is the assistant director for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.

