

October 23, 2009 12:00 PM CST

✓ **Stimulus funds to pay for part of \$2M RiverCentre solar-thermal development**

by Bob Geiger Staff Writer Finance and Commerce.com

With cold October rain falling behind them, federal and local officials Friday announced a \$2 million solar-thermal development in downtown St. Paul that will be partially paid for with economic stimulus funds.

"Solar is coming; it is the wave of the present not the future, and it is here," said Charlie Hemmeline, director of market transformation for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Solar Program.

Scheduled for completion by the end of 2010, the solar-thermal installation has an effective power generation of 1 megawatt, which represents a 66.7 percent increase in the state's solar energy capacity and becomes Minnesota's largest solar power source.

The project is distinctive because it will provide hot water and conventional photovoltaic solar energy to District Energy St. Paul, which fuels North America's largest hot water district heating and cooling system with a biomass-fueled heat and power plant.

Anders Rydaker, president of District Energy St. Paul and District Cooling St. Paul, said solar collectors will be installed on the roof of the St. Paul RiverCentre over the next year.

Rydaker acknowledged that solar "is not going to solve our energy future," adding that future energy needs must be met by a number of smaller, local energy generating facilities that complement larger plants that generated base-load power.

A possible job spur

The \$1 million in DOE funding comes from a total of \$10 million awarded to solar projects in 25 U.S. cities or metro areas through a Solar America Cities program. District Heating St. Paul will pay for the project's remaining \$1 million cost.

Joining Hemmeline and Rydaker were St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and R.T. Rybak, mayor of Minneapolis. Rybak attended because Minneapolis is involved in the grant program through a study of potential large-scale solar energy sites in business parks, corporate hubs and other locations.

That assessment will be conducted by District Energy St. Paul and NRG Energy Inc.'s NRG Thermal LLC business unit.

Critics of solar energy cite its costly nature and general lack of generating capacity. That applies more to photovoltaic panels than solar-thermal panels, which heat water more directly and have an efficiency rating that's higher than photovoltaic systems.

Standing before a pair of 4-foot-by-6-foot solar-thermal panels manufactured by SolarSkies, a Starbuck-based manufacturer of such panels, Rydaker said paying for a \$2 million project "wouldn't be possible without a public-private partnership."

Hemmeline said he hopes the partnership of Minneapolis and St. Paul will create a replicable model for

other Solar America Cities — saturating both cities with solar installations and increasing the amount of energy produced.

Democrats Rybak and Coleman both have sought economic stimulus support for projects in their cities from the Obama administration.

“If anybody asks you where the stimulus dollars are going here in America, you tell them the solar collector in St. Paul,” said Rybak.

A possible 2010 Democratic candidate for governor, Rybak said such projects create jobs in industries that have experienced 50 percent unemployment rates.

Referring to the solar-thermal project, he said, “It’s time for this not to be an island in the country. It’s the norm.”

Minneapolis is scheduled on Nov. 2 to issue a request for proposals for a 600-kilowatt photovoltaic solar array on top of the Minneapolis Convention Center that, if completed, would provide some of the Convention Center’s power.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul solar-thermal project received DOE solar grants after a competitive review of projects from a number of cities. Many cities are located in the west, south and east coast.

Among the 25 recipients, Minneapolis-St. Paul is one of six cities or metro areas that are in located in the northern part of the U.S.

In addition to Minneapolis-St. Paul, northern U.S. solar grant recipients are Ann Arbor, Mich.; Madison, Wis.; Milwaukee, New York City and Boston.

Addressing the crowd of 50 in the warm confines of RiverCentre, Coleman said, “Thanks to the federal government. How often do you hear that?”