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# success stories

TAOS COUNTY AND THE MORENO VALLEY

## Northern New Mexico College Sustainable education for sustainable communities

By Sandy Penny

**N**orthern New Mexico College (NNMC) in Española is thinking and planning for the future. NNMC President Dr. Jose Griego examined many important contributions the school could make to the region. Sustainability kept showing up as an ongoing issue. His existing plan includes education that contributes to sustainable energy, food and health. He wants the college to be on leading edge of preparing students for a successful future.

According to House Power Magazine's rating of the 10 states with the most solar potential, New Mexico is one of the top two. Developing this solar potential could impact not only the Northern New Mexico region but the entire nation. Griego's next logical step was to conceptualize a research park and academic program devoted to solar energy. He says, "It was one of the quickest ways we could have an impact on the energy sector."

Dr. Andres C. Salazar, Computer, Engineering and Technology Department chair, was selected to spearhead the Solar Energy Research Park and Academy (SERPA) initiative. SERPA can bring investment to the region in the form of jobs and business development, Salazar says. "One of the potential benefits is that businesses like to establish themselves at research parks to align with the technologies being developed."

SERPA's three main objectives are as follows:

- To conduct applied research and testing at NNMC on science and technology in alternative energy developed by Los Alamos National Laboratories.
- To research solar related products and services while developing governmental policy and guidelines on the use of alternative energy as it relates to solar power for residential and commercial use.
- To train a workforce skilled in solar energy science and practices, through associate, bachelor's and master's degrees with a focus on solar technology.

The SERPA initiative has received enthusiastic support and interest throughout the region. New Mexico Speaker of the House Ben Lujan introduced a bill in this year's legislative session to fund SERPA. Additional political support came



New Mexico Gov. Governor Dean D. Depietro (left) at NNMC. He only has to visit with the Ben Griego, Jeff and Computer, Engineering, and Technology (CEIT) Chair Dr. Andres C. Salazar (right) about SERPA. Dotted circles mark the main's support for continued development of SERPA at NNMC and discussed options for increased funding from congressional development programs.

from congressional candidate Ben Ray Lujan, the state Department of Economic Development, U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, U.S. Rep. Tom Udall and New Mexico Lt. Gov. Diane Denish. The project took on a life of its own, and the legislature initially approved \$2 million to launch the new SERPA facility at the NNMC.

The current plan includes a facility that pairs private industry with the education and research sectors to encourage the development of new equipment and practices. A well-trained work force should encourage consumers to move more toward solar power. All these efforts can establish the region as a long-range planner and implementer of sustainable energy projects.

The local economy should reap the benefits of new jobs, lower energy costs and more sustainable energy initiatives. In some instances, one could even get rebates from the power company if more energy is generated, used and gets fed back into the collective grid.

NNMC already offers an associate degree in renewable energy. This fall the college will offer bachelor's programs directly related to SERPA. Among them are a bachelor of engineering and a bachelor in software engineering. Information both with a solar

Carson Electric Cooperative is making significant contributions. Kit Carson Electric Cooperative received federal funding through renewable energy bonds for several projects in the region. Taking NNMC's El Rito campus partially off the grid is one of many projects it has scheduled. This will help make the campus more sustainable and reduce electricity costs. Plans for solar farms are also being discussed. The Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), the city of Española, Rio Arriba County, and several private industry solar companies have demonstrated additional interest.

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Dr. Andres C. Salazar, CEIT Chair, Computer, Engineering and Technology (CEIT) Chair, spearheads the SERPA initiative.

Salazar is hiring four new faculty members to support the courses.

Griego said, "We can't officially begin construction until July 1 when we receive funding, however, we are looking at all our options for building a facility to house SERPA. It makes sense to consider options for programs that will work together in developing solar technology and policy to be located near one another. We are also considering a sustainable building of proven design that will represent SERPA in the truest sense of the sustainable, renewable energy philosophy." Many other options are being considered that meet all the criteria within the legislative funding guidelines. Griego sums it up, "We are approaching this project strategically, and wisely and economically, and that's why it has so much potential to be a major success story."

Kit Carson Electric Cooperative plans to set up a solar array at NNMC. It will create a more sustainable energy-related campus.

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