UT research center receives grant for solar cell systems

By Ahsika Sanders, Daily Texan Staff
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A $1.6 million grant from the State Energy Conservation Office will help fund two solar cell systems at the J.J. Pickle Research Campus in North Austin.

The grant will cover 80 percent of the costs of the panel installation at the J.J. Pickle Research Campus, said facilities services spokeswoman Laurie Lentz.

“The Pickle Research Campus, unlike the main campus, buys power from Austin Energy, so this installation will allow us to generate a portion of our own power at the campus,” she said.

The solar panels are expected to reduce the campus’ electricity consumption from Austin Energy, which will save a substantial amount of money over the next 25 years and reduce the carbon footprint for the campus, said Juan Nunez, campus associate director for facilities services.

“We buy power from plants that use natural gas and release emissions,” he said. “So the more power we generate with solar panels, the less carbon power plants have to emit and the less money we spend.”

Nunez said the campus originally considered switching to biodiesel sources of energy to save money and reduce carbon emissions, but found that solar panels would be more efficient.

“Biodiesel has already had its run, and it’s not that feasible,” he said. “When we did our research we found that many cars that went that route aren’t able to be used anymore, so we took the money from that project and put it toward the solar system.”

The money originally earmarked for the biodiesel project will cover the remaining 20 percent of the cost of the solar installation.

Andrew Townsend, co-director of the Campus Environmental Center, said although solar panels are fairly effective at saving money, solar heating systems, such as the one on the Norman Hackerman Building, are better systems. Systems such as the campus power plant are best because it is more effective to generate heat than electricity.

“Our power plant is an extremely efficient system,” he said. “Its efficiency ratings are within the 80th to 90th percentile, which is extremely high for a natural gas power plant, so it saves us a lot of money and a lot of energy.”

The campus panel installation began Monday, but will not be fully ready to use until late this May.

A solar installation similar to the system at the research campus will be installed on top of Manor Garage this summer, said Campus Environmental Center co-director Rachel Aitkens.

“We’re working with a solar proposal that was submitted a few years ago by some engineers on campus who used different technologies to determine the best option for a garage,” she said.

Aitkens said beginning next semester, students will pay a $5 “green fund” fee during the long semesters and a $2.50 fee during the summer some of which will go toward funding future projects.

The Green Fund Task Force — which consists of members of Student Government, the Campus Environmental Center, the Student Assembly and two regular undergraduates — will be in charge of distributing and collecting the fund.