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Peter Cassidy, principal at John Paul II Secondary School, speaks at the ribbon-cutting ceremo

Peter Cassidy, principal at John Paul II Secondary School, speaks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the newly retrofitted carbon-neutral school in London, Ontario, Nov. 2. (CNS photo/courtesy Raymond Garcia, via Catholic Register)

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John Paul II Secondary School in London, Ontario, is Canada's first self-sufficient, carbon-neutral school, drawing on solar and geothermal energy for its power needs.

The project saw 2,700 carport solar panels installed throughout the school's parking lots, providing power to a battery system that will stores energy for heating, cooling and providing electricity.

The improvements will reduce greenhouse gas emissions to near zero, eliminating the emission of approximately 277 tons of carbon a year. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held Nov. 2.

"There was will at the executive levels of the school board to engage in this project, and that's really what allowed it to come about," said Peter Cassidy, principal at John Paul II.

Cassidy understands that it can be difficult for school boards "to engage in projects that exceed the basic requirements" because of funding issues, but said he is proud of the board for making it happen. The London District Catholic School Board funded more than half of the project, which cost 9.7 million Canadian dollars (US$7.7 million), with the federal government contributing $4.8 million.

"The fact that they were able to work cooperatively in what I think was a really sophisticated collaboration between a variety of government agencies, local power authorities and different energy partners was probably a difficult navigation, but they persisted," Cassidy said.

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A renewable energy company, Ameresco, Inc., started retrofitting for the project in 2019, with minor delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The board has worked with the company over the past decade, implementing energy-reduction projects worth more than $50 million.

"We are thrilled to continue our partnership with the London District Catholic School Board by collaborating on such a monumental project," said Bob McCullough, president of Ameresco Canada. "Our work with JPII is a wonderful illustration of how a complex project, seemingly far beyond a facility's budget, can be completed through flexible funding and adaptation. This sets the stage for how other educational institutions can implement infrastructures to achieve carbon-neutral goals in the future."

The solutions implemented not only helped the school become energy self-sufficient, but also delivered significant cost savings, with a 68% reduction in baseline electricity costs.

The significance and symbolism of a Catholic school being at the forefront of such change in Canada is not lost on Cassidy. He said the board commitment and investment in this project is an example of putting "our money where our values are."

The fact that the ribbon cutting took place during Treaties Recognition Week can also stand as a symbol of the school community's commitment to follow the example of sustainability set by Indigenous peoples, he said.

"We often read the land acknowledgment at school, and we talk about the First Nations people, so I think we can learn a lot from them about stewardship as well," he said. "This taking place during Treaties Recognition Week seemed like a pretty serendipitous thing. I think we're trying to be consistent with our faith and our values, and this is representative of that."

[Wendy-Ann Clarke is on the staff of The Catholic Register in Toronto.]