

Phil Villagomez here, welcoming you to the inaugural edition of TerraVerde’s “Energy Chat Blog.” I recently had the privilege of interviewing Matt Belasco of Pittsburg Unified School District, and I cannot think of a better leader to interview for this initial installment of this blog series. A champion in sustainable practices, Matt leads the Maintenance, Operations, and Transportation department at PUSD. Under his guidance, the district has earned accolades like the Green Ribbon Schools Award and the Golden Bell Award. These honors, from the California Department of Energy and the California School Board Association, recognize their pioneering work in renewable energy. Join us as we delve into the district’s journey towards sustainability, learning from a leader who’s shaping a greener future for education.”

In This Interview at a Glance:

- 1. Innovative Renewable Energy Initiatives:** Discover how Pittsburg Unified School District, under Matt Belasco’s leadership, is pioneering sustainable practices with projects like solar PV systems, wind energy, electric bus fleets, and battery energy storage.
- 2. Impact and Recognition:** Learn about the significant recognition the district has received, such as being featured in a PG&E commercial, and understand how this visibility is influencing and inspiring other school districts towards renewable energy adoption.
- 3. Future Goals and Challenges:** Gain insights into the district’s upcoming sustainability goals, including the deployment of major battery energy storage systems and bi-directional chargers. Also, delve into the challenges they face, like managing aging infrastructure and resource allocation, providing a realistic view of the journey towards sustainability in education.

Tell me about Pittsburg Unified’s commitment to renewable energy

Our district has long been an environmental leader that started with our early adoption of solar PV and our wind energy demonstration project and now has led us to launch our electric bus fleet and now to our battery energy storage project. I am very proud that our board is in full support of our energy policies and thus we have a long-term commitment to renewable energy that is not dependent on any one individual.

How have your energy programs and the recognition that comes with them impacted the district?

We were recently featured in a PG&E commercial that highlighted our electric bus fleet. That spot has resulted in great recognition for the district and has allowed us to be a source of truth to other districts interested in similar energy programs. In addition to the PG&E commercial, we have received much-appreciated attention from the California Department of Education and the California School Board Association.

What is your next green energy goal for the district?

We currently have a major battery energy storage program underway that will feature 11 batteries at 10 sites. This is an exciting opportunity that was advanced by the SGIP incentive program. We also have a CEC grant that will result in 6 level 3 bi-directional chargers that when paired with our electric buses will result in site resiliency.

What has been your biggest challenge in managing your energy program?

Our biggest challenge has been the reality of aging infrastructure and the challenge of allocating resources to that infrastructure. One example is what we are facing with aging solar PV inverters. This is an ongoing challenge and one that we know we will have to face given that we own our solar systems, and we are responsible for ongoing maintenance.

How has your district's renewable energy program inspired or impacted district students?

Pittsburg High School is home to a student environmental stewardship program called Club Power. The club has had the opportunity to tour district facilities and discuss future employment opportunities in the renewable energy industry. I hope that having exposure to our energy systems will encourage vocational-minded students to pursue careers as solar and battery maintenance techs.

More about Pittsburg High School: <https://phs.pittsburgusd.net/#>

Tell us about your experience with participating in the Renewable Energy Certificate (REC) market.

The REC program has been a big win for the district. Given that our solar program is about cost avoidance through self-generation, I am happy to report that the revenue we receive from both our REC sales and our Low Carbon Fuel Credits (LCFS) is re-invested into expanding our renewable energy programs and paying for the management of those assets. One example is that Pittsburg Unified plans to deploy 60 level 2 EV chargers at school sites and the district admin office.

More on Renewable Energy Certificates:

<https://terraverde.energy/revenue-opportunities-for-existing-solar-and-battery-systems/>

What advice do you have for school districts that have not yet adopted renewable energy programs?

Even with recent changes to the net energy metering utility tariff structures, I think that opportunities still exist. I suggest that schools partner with industry professionals when undertaking energy projects. This collaborative approach can help when it comes to incentive programs by increasing your chance of success. I also recommend that school MOT staff stay active in their advocacy and stakeholder groups. I am currently the chair of the maintenance and operations professional council for CASBO's Northern Section. I strongly suggest that individuals get involved with your preferred industry group to further their professional development.



Pictured, Matt Belasco, MOT Director at Pittsburg USD and Phil Villagomez, Executive Vice President at TerraVerde Energy. TerraVerde Energy provides full scope solar Asset Management for Pittsburg Unified School District including solar PV Maintenance Service Management and Renewable Energy Certificate monetization services.

