PHOTO BY JIM KNOWLES

San Lorenzo school district officials, teachers and students joined Chevron employees in a ceremonial ribbon cutting for the solar panel project at San Lorenzo High on Monday.

By Jim Knowles

San Leandro Times

The canopies over the parking lots at Arroyo and San Lorenzo high schools are providing more than shade.

The roofs are a platform for the new solar panels. The San Lorenzo school district announced it will save millions in the coming years, thanks to the power of the sun.

The district says the panels will save $4.5 million over the life of the project in the next two decades, after paying for the $5 million cost of installation. The panels at eight school sites will produce up to 1,000 kilowatts (1 megawatt) of electricity when the sun is shining.

“I wouldn’t have wanted the project unless there was a cost benefit of the students,” said San Lorenzo schools superintendent Dennis Byas. “We’ll have a net savings that we can put back

into our general funds to benefit the students."

At a ceremony at San Lorenzo High on Monday afternoon, Byas thanked the school board and the voters who passed Measure O, which funds the project.

Teachers and school district officials said it was the students' ideas that inspired the project, especially the students at the high school's Green Academy.

"We encourage students to be bold and inventive and see what they can create to change our world for the better," said Bohannon Middle School Principal Gail Yothers.

But the know-how for the solar project came from an unlikely source – one of the biggest oil companies in the world. The school district brought in Chevron to install the solar panels. An offshoot called Chevron Energy Solutions builds hundreds of sustainable energy projects for education and business across the country.

“Schools are incubators for the leaders of industry, so I can think of no better place to demonstrate the project,” said Teresa Mayer, the chief financial officer for Chevron Energy Solutions.

The San Lorenzo High Jazz Ensemble played and hors d’oeuvres made in the school district’s new kitchen were served after the ceremony.

Byas said the project was just a part of the modernization of San Lorenzo public schools – along with the state-of-the-art kitchen, new science and math labs, and well for irrigation to save water costs.

Byas said he preferred the panels on canopies over the parking lots rather than on rooftops because they make fixing a leaking roof a much more expensive project.

“Besides,” he said. “They just don’t look good on a roof.”