Shimkus tours Eastern's Renewable Energy Center

CHARLESTON — U.S. Rep. John Shimkus got a sneak peek at the new Center for Clean Energy Research and Education during his recent visit to Eastern Illinois University.

Shimkus also joined EIU President William Perry on a tour of EIU's Renewable Energy Center, which is pioneering the use of biomass fuels on the campus.

"I'm very pleased to see the flexibility of this facility, with the option to use both fossil fuels like natural gas and oil along with plant-based fuels," Shimkus said. "It's exactly the kind of flexibility we need because it just doesn't make sense to put all your eggs in one basket."

Shimkus also applauded the collaboration between the university's physical plant and the academic side — a collaboration that allows the university to use the center as a working lab while also providing heat for the entire campus.

That collaboration also allowed the university to add new master's and bachelor's degrees in renewable energy, according to Perry.

"We made a commitment to move to more sustainable energy sources when we decided to close our old coal-fired steam plant," Perry said. "That plant was at the end of its useful life and had serious emissions issues."

The Renewable Energy Center, on the other hand, has earned a Platinum Rating from the U.S. Green Building Council — the only power plant in the nation to earn that distinction.

Perry said that the academic role of the complex will expand shortly when the new CENCERE center opens next to the Renewable Energy Center. The CENCERE building will house laboratories where EIU researchers and their students will test a variety of locally grown crops to evaluate their usefulness as biomass fuels.

"CENCERE will also welcome entrepreneurs who can tap into the university in developing their own green energy products and services," Perry said. "We are confident that EIU can help lead the way to a more secure energy future while we also protect the environment."

"Best of all," Perry added, "renewable energy can help produce great new jobs for Central Illinois."