

## Students tour Rockies Express Pipeline facility

By CHRIS LUSVARDI - H&R Staff Writer

BLUE MOUND - Chris Younker was amazed by what he and other Taylorville High School students saw Thursday at the Rockies Express Pipeline compressor station near Blue Mound.

The senior in Lee Meter's ag engineering class has been considering going to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale next year in hopes of becoming a building engineer or civil engineer. The field trip has him thinking a bit differently.

"It's gotten my interest more into mechanical engineering," Younker said. "I wasn't expecting seeing that much from the outside."

The compressor station is a key part of the \$5-billion, 1,679-mile pipeline and will be one of the most visible lasting impressions of the project, Rockies Express spokesman Allen Fore said. Almost every other part of the project running through parts of Christian, Macon, Moultrie and Douglas counties will be, or has been, buried underground, Fore said.

The station will take in gas coming from the direction of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado before processing it and pushing it off toward Indiana and Ohio.

It's taken nearly 1,500 construction workers to build the pipeline through Illinois, Fore said. The portion of it running through the area is on schedule to come online sometime in April, he said.

Once it comes online, the lasting impact on the area will be nearly endless as it provides natural gas for many years to come, Fore said. It currently carries enough gas to heat 2 million homes. By the time the entire project is completed, it is expected to carry enough to heat 4 million homes, Fore said.

"We all know this past winter the importance of natural gas because it heats our homes," Fore said. "We hope it will have a positive impact on natural gas prices."

The station, the only one of its kind in Illinois, is designed to maintain pressure on the pipeline, said Wayne Pierce, site supervisor.

Construction continued above and below as the students toured the 17-acre facility.

The 27 students were told welders on the project make \$68 an hour, which Meter said likely caught their attention.

"With the economy the way it is and telling how much they make, I think we will see a lot more looking at schools in the area and considering it," Meter said. "It's quite an accomplishment. It's good for them to see opportunities of putting pipeline welders in the field."

Meter said it was a unique opportunity to give his students an up-close look at a major project in the area and see what welding and fabrication jobs are like.

"I haven't done anything like this in a long time," Meter said. "I haven't been on something like this for over 20 years, and I've been teaching for 30 years."

Junior Ty Metsker was awestruck seeing the project that will help heat homes. He wants to go into farm management, but the project caught his attention.

"I've been by this a couple months ago," Metsker said. "Now it's all up. I'm not sure if I want to do it every day, but the money they make sure makes me want to do something like it."

Fore said the station is expected to employ between 5 and 10 people, one of the few parts of the project to create directly-related permanent jobs.

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