

OP-ED

Legislature must boost renewable energy 'net metering' program

By Kirt Mayland

With the coronavirus still raging nationwide and spreading protests, it is easy to feel that not much good is happening in America. But New Englanders can congratulate themselves about one good piece of news: Over the past 10 years, often with the support of government, many of the states have increased their share of renewable energy.

But Connecticut still has a long way to go to join this success, especially with respect to solar.

When the legislature meets in its September special session, something called the virtual net metering caps should be at the top of its list — and the governor's list.

Under the program, towns, public schools and police departments with small renewable energy systems such as solar panels receive direct credits on their electrical bills from renewable energy companies, generating vast savings for them. Virtual net metering takes nothing from the state budget and rewards small solar companies, who get paid what their kilowatt hours are worth.

Net metering is a way for Connecticut to declare its energy independence. Small commercial solar projects are directly connected to local distribution systems and avoid the conventional Eversource or UI transmission systems. It is a way for Connecticut consumers to avoid the kind of huge increases in their bills that is so controversial in the state. Solar companies pay for their own distribution system upgrades and maintenance.

In other words, with solar, your electric bill will not go up. In the long run, with the sun as a free power source, your bills will go down.

The solar projects that will be supported by the net metering program are not the controversial 60-acre plus monsters previously doled out in state auctions. These small projects generally avoid the erosion, aesthetic, and loss of large-scale farmland issues raised by the big projects. These smaller privately financed projects — roughly 4 to 9 acres — are less intrusive to communities and, incidentally, create a lot of outdoor COVID-19-friendly jobs for electricians and construction workers.

In neighboring Massachusetts, net

metering has already helped create four times as much installed solar power as in Connecticut. Massachusetts responded to the crisis created by COVID-19 by increasing its commercial solar program by 1,600 megawatts. Massachusetts also has five times as many solar jobs as Connecticut. And these solar jobs help spur lots of in-state electrical, engineering and construction jobs.

Limited net metering is already a popular program in Connecticut. Last year, when the legislature increased its cap on the program, it was expected to take years to fulfill its goal. However, independent solar companies had bid on every project available in a matter of weeks.

The legislature's Energy & Technology committee now favors increasing the size of the program this year with potentially half of the program allocated to struggling municipalities with modest tax bases.

Doubling the program could bring millions of dollars of benefits to towns and other public entities.

And they are going to need it. Connecticut towns are facing devastating cash flow problems due to COVID-19 and other issues. Virtual net metering provides stable cash flow — uninterrupted by pandemics or economic downturns.

"Virtual net metering" may not be a term that makes you the most entertaining person at a coffee shop or cocktail party. But that's what is at stake when the legislature meets in September. Net metering is a program with bipartisan support that creates stable revenue for struggling towns and school districts, and new revenue for Connecticut landowners.

The program results in minimal land use impacts, could create thousands of COVID-19-safe jobs, and fulfills Gov. Lamont's stated mission of more Connecticut-based zero emission energy.

This program increase should be approved without hesitation in the upcoming session. The governor's office should provide its full support.

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