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Pennsylvania being left behind as community solar shines

By Ad Crable, Bay Journal News Service

Even as solar energy is gearing up for record growth in Pennsylvania, state legislators have steadfastly refused so far to allow a form known as community solar — which would allow anyone to help pay for small, localized solar arrays and get credits on their electric bills.

Nearby states such as Maryland, New York, Virginia, West Virginia and Delaware, as well as Washington, D.C. all have some form of community solar. All have mechanisms built in to help low- and-moderate income ratepayers share in the savings.

But for four years now, legislation to allow community solar has been bottled up in committees, bipartisan support notwithstanding, much to the frustration of solar groups and others. Among the supporters is the powerful Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, which says farmers long suffering from low commodity prices could provide ideal sites for solar arrays to support their families and serve their communities.

In the latest push to dislodge frozen community solar bills from legislative committees, proponents cited a survey of solar developers by Penn State University, which found that removing legal barriers would clear the way for more than 230 shovel-ready community solar projects around the state.

The projects could save participating residents across the state \$30 million annually in badly needed electric bill relief, frustrated advocates told state committee members at a hearing.

A poll found 80% of Pennsylvanians surveyed want the community solar option and 60% said they would subscribe if they could.

Solar advocates blame uncooperative utilities and natural gas fracking companies that don't want competition, as well as some key legislators.

“There is a definite anti-clean-energy attitude in the Pennsylvania legislature,” said Jennifer Quinn, Sierra Club Pennsylvania’s legislative and political director.

Community solar, sometimes known as shared solar, is the fastest-growing wave of solar energy growth, and the Biden administration has set a goal of 5 million U.S. households signed up for it in the next three years — about a 700% increase from current numbers.

The concept of community solar is simple: Anyone who gets an electric bill can help pay, in an amount of their choice, for the electricity produced at a solar array built in their community.

Subscribers not only get to help support a carbon-free form of energy that stays in their area but also earn renewable energy credits that reduce their electric bill —usually to the tune of 10% or 20%.

The option appeals to some of the 50% to 70% of American households that are not in a position install their own solar arrays. That includes renters who cannot modify their properties, residents of developments where homeowner associations do not allow solar, and homeowners and businesses whose rooftops are too shady or otherwise unsuitable for solar panels.

Add to that list those who can’t afford the upfront costs of their own solar panels or who want to exercise their energy choice by financially supporting, no matter how modest, the switch to clean energy.

“The promise of solar energy is not just that it’s clean and renewable, but that anyone can own it and reap the benefits that come with ownership. It means our energy system doesn’t have to be dominated by a handful of monopoly utilities, but becomes more democratic,” said Henry McKay of Solar United Neighbors, a national nonprofit that helps people and communities go solar.

Community solar projects are mostly built by private developers who then solicit subscribers, but in some cases communities and businesses band together to launch them. A business can place an array on a roof or parking lot and attract subscribers from nearby businesses or tenants.

Increasingly, an economic justice aspect is being baked into such projects. For example, Maryland, New York and Washington, D.C. require that a portion of community solar subscriptions be reserved for low- and moderate-income residents, or for disadvantaged communities.

A recent executive action by the Biden administration will hook up more low-income residents to community solar to lower their electric bills.

The initiative would help 4.5 million participants in an existing federal program that subsidizes energy costs by connecting them to developers of community solar projects. An online platform will be set up for participants to shop for projects, which will be vetted by the government.

These projects could spur development of 134 gigawatts — enough to power 25 million homes — of new solar capacity nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

But not in Pennsylvania, unless things change.

A recent Princeton University study predicts tax incentives contained in the \$369 billion Inflation Reduction Act could swell the pace of nationwide solar projects five-fold each year, beginning as early as 2025.

While harnessing renewable energy from the sun will rely heavily on large utility-scale solar arrays, the smaller, more grassroots form of community solar power will be indispensable in achieving both the country's and individual states' climate goals, experts say.

Pennsylvania has a goal of reducing the state's greenhouse gas emissions by 26% by 2025 and 80% by 2050.

Over the last 5 years or so, legislators in 22 states and the District of Columbia have revised regulations to allow for community solar options. Community solar projects have been built by private entrepreneurs in another 17 states.

The average output of a community solar array is 3 megawatts, enough to power about 47 homes. Ground or roof-based arrays have been built in the region on commercial buildings, old industrial sites, landfills, farm fields and church grounds.

Pennsylvania has a fair showing in utility-scale solar projects built by universities, large companies and the utilities themselves. Counting individual rooftop installations, there are more than 24,000 solar panels soaking up the sun for energy in Pennsylvania. Still, solar produces well below 1% of all electricity in the state.

In 2021, Gov. Tom Wolf announced a major clean-energy initiative that will produce nearly 50% of state government's electricity through seven new solar arrays to be built around the state.

But community solar has not gotten out of the starting gate.

Largely that's because of politics, said Rob Altenburg, senior director for energy and climate for the PennFuture citizens group.

"The fracked gas industry doesn't want competition, and they have a powerful lobby. We also have anti-environmental and climate change-denying legislators that will vote against anything supported by the environmental community."

In hearings before key state committees where community solar bills are sent, electric and natural gas utilities have testified against true community solar initiatives, saying subsidized solar energy is driving up costs for the majority of other ratepayers because they have to bear the costs of grid use by solar.

Pennsylvania's Consumer Advocate has disagreed with that position, testifying that community solar actually benefits the electric grid, increasing reliability and resilience.

Community solar advocates in Pennsylvania are hoping billions of dollars in solar credits contained in the new Inflation Reduction Act will finally push legislators to adopt community solar.

“I’m hoping that the new incentives for community solar projects ... could support a version of community solar that is able to get enough support to pass,” said McKay. “We’re essentially leaving money on the table if we begin yet another year as a state without a community solar program.”

Ad Crable is a Bay Journal staff writer based in Pennsylvania. The original version of this article was published in the October 2022 issue of the Bay Journal and was distributed by the Bay Journal News Service.

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Members of the Cedar Ridge Community Church in Montgomery County, MD, gather in front of the 2-megawatt community solar installation on the church's property. Pennsylvania lags behind most surrounding states in allowing construction of community solar arrays. (Bay Journal photo by Dave Harp)

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