

Viewpoints: Energy projects should help poor areas thrive

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California once again is at the forefront of national efforts to address the crisis of global warming and achieve a thoughtful transition from fossil fuel to clean and renewable energy sources. By signing a law that requires 33 percent of the energy produced by all of the state's major retail electricity suppliers to come from renewable sources by 2020, Gov. Jerry Brown has positioned the Golden State to lead the nation in reducing greenhouse gases that threaten the future of Mother Earth.

What has been somewhat overlooked is Brown's commitment to build 12,000 megawatts of distributed energy infrastructure. "Distributed generation" refers to smaller, local renewable energy projects built close to where electricity is consumed, a contrast to the distant large solar and wind farms that receive a significant amount of media coverage.

How and where this distributed generation infrastructure will be constructed is a matter yet to be decided. A stakeholder group convened by Brown will help determine the state's plan during the next several months. This group has an opportunity to develop a plan that not only will generate clean energy, but also can create economic opportunity for California's environmental justice communities – disadvantaged communities of color with long-standing problems of high unemployment and poverty. These communities have also borne the brunt of the environmental and health impacts from dirty energy generation, and should be first to benefit from the burgeoning green energy economy.

Organizations representing these communities worked tirelessly to shape the content of, and build support for, the renewables portfolio standard legislation. These efforts helped ensure that new renewable energy transmission projects will be developed with the least amount of ecological consequences, while strengthening the state's commitment to energy efficiency and distributed generation. We are equally committed to working with the governor to help design this new system in a way that is cost-effective, equitable, environmentally sound and fiscally smart. We want to ensure that all communities benefit from infrastructure investments, not just the wealthier suburban communities that historically reap the rewards of investment in distributed generation such as customer-owned solar power.

State guidelines for building the local renewable infrastructure should include transparency via a process that allows for maximum participation, like public hearings in our poor inner city and rural communities. The guidelines also should be equitable, meaning a real commitment to building a significant portion of the distributed generation projects in the state's poorest and most polluted communities. Finally, these guidelines should include a strong commitment to democratic control of this new infrastructure, allowing for locally owned energy projects and local energy cooperatives.

Quite frankly, too much of our energy infrastructure is controlled by large corporate utilities, which have often resisted the development of renewable energy and rarely consider the needs of people in our poorest communities.

The renewables portfolio standard law serves up an opportunity to create a visionary energy system that is at once equitable, democratically controlled, reasonably priced and highly efficient. It will also provide a much-needed stimulus to the state's economy, creating many thousands of new jobs in the green-collar economy. We are looking forward to working with the governor and other stakeholders to achieve this vision.

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