

Opinion: Remove Barriers to Small-Scale Green Energy Systems

Nicole Capretz | Posted: Sunday, June 12, 2011 12:00 pm

By signing a law that requires 33 percent of the energy produced by all of the state's utilities to come from renewable sources by 2020, Gov. Jerry Brown has positioned the Golden State to lead the nation in reducing the threat of the global climate crisis and create a thriving green energy economy.

Gov. Brown raised the bar by setting a goal to build 12,000 megawatts of distributed energy infrastructure statewide — smaller, local renewable energy projects built close to where electricity is consumed. This means installing solar on rooftops, parking lots and vacant lands — a sharp contrast to the massive transmission lines like the Sunrise Powerlink and distant large-scale solar and wind farms. The San Diego region is currently slated to install 2,000 megawatts of the 12,000 megawatt small-scale systems.

California's environmental justice communities — communities of color with long-standing problems of high unemployment, poverty and pollution — applaud the Governor's efforts and attention to local distributed energy systems. Many of these communities, including San Diego neighborhoods like Barrio Logan, National City and West Chula Vista, have borne the brunt of the environmental and health impacts from dirty energy generation and should be first to benefit from the burgeoning clean energy economy.

Installing clean energy systems in these communities can bring in critically important tax dollars and jobs, as well as valuable new assets and infrastructure investments. Residents also want 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, who have often resisted the development of renewable energy and rarely consider the needs of people in our poorest communities.

Ultimately, we believe that a prosperous green future for all is possible only if utilities like San Diego Gas & Electric invest in their local community and remove barriers to the installation of small-scale green energy systems.

Public officials must make wider and more aggressive use of the tools at their disposal. This includes using the bully pulpit to push energy issues to the forefront, creating contracting requirements for labor standards and local hire, implementing green energy mandates on buildings, forging partnerships with local business, and including initiatives to spur locally based capital investment. If done correctly, we can develop forms of community-supportive economic enterprises that anchor jobs in communities and ensure wealth-creation in all neighborhoods.

There is no doubt that we can forge clean energy solutions that benefit all San Diegans, including our corporate and government partners. The question is whether SDG&E, local elected officials and other stakeholders are willing to step up the plate and deliver that homerun that uplifts our entire region without sacrificing communities that are historically left out of the process.

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