

January, 16, 2024

Testimony of Nate Reagle, Clean Energy Program Advocate
On behalf of the Sierra Club Pennsylvania Chapter
To the House Consumer Protection, Technology and Utilities Committee

On Sierra Club's SUPPORT of House Bill 1842

Introduction

Established in 1892, the Sierra Club is the oldest and largest grassroots non-profit environmental organization in the country. Our Chapter has nearly 30,000 members, and these members have a strong interest in the equitable deployment of clean energy.

Community Solar

Community solar is a model that greatly enables the expansion of solar power production by allowing solar production at a separate location than the customers subscribing to the service. Pennsylvania is lagging behind surrounding states when it comes to community solar. Pennsylvania is one of only six states without community solar enabling legislation¹. House Bill 1842 would bring Pennsylvania up to par by enabling community solar.

Federal Funding

The timing for community solar is beyond ripe with current Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding opportunities available to states. Having community solar as an option not only enhances the competitiveness of the state's grant applications for solar funding, it opens the door to community solar specific programs and funding such as the Department of Energy's Community Power AcceleratorTM Prize and the National Community Solar Partnership program². Being able to utilize community solar as an option also eases the challenge of deploying federal monies for the purpose of solar development. The challenges of deploying a low- to moderate-income residential solar program utilizing only rooftop solar could result in sectors such as manufactured housing and multi-family housing being neglected. These challenges, such as current roof condition, existing wiring and electrical box, and ownership status can be overcome with community solar. Without having community solar as a tool in the toolbox, there is a real risk the commonwealth is leaving federal money on the table for surrounding states to take advantage of. Not only is the state not as competitive without the community solar option, but there is also a risk of not being able to expend federal funding directed toward low- to moderate-income households within the grant deadlines. The current federal grant opportunities also present a unique opportunity to jumpstart community solar in Pennsylvania without relying on state taxpayer funded incentives.

Community Benefits

Community solar also eliminates many barriers that low- to moderate-income residents encounter when attempting to participate in solar programs. Being able to purchase a subscription to a community solar program bypasses the obstacles of roof condition, ownership

versus renting status, roof orientation, shading, and other site conditions, resulting in equitable access to the benefits of solar. Only 22-27% of residential household roofs are suitable for solar PV installation³. Community solar is the only practical option available to access the manufactured housing and multifamily housing sectors with renewable energy⁴.

Efficiency also increases with community solar as an option. The scale of community solar projects contributes to increased efficiency, as well as the ability to site community solar projects in ideal locations rather than making a less than ideal rooftop work⁵. Community solar also contributes to overall grid resilience and reduces the over-reliance on fossil fuel energy production by providing a more diverse energy portfolio⁶. Combining energy storage with community solar improves the resilience even more⁷.

Labor and Workforce Development

House Bill 1842 mandates prevailing wages and benefit rates for the construction of community solar facilities in accordance with the Pennsylvania Prevailing Wage Act. The use of federal funds is often associated with similar requirements such as abiding by the Davis Bacon Act. In the event that both the state and federal requirements apply, the worker benefits since neither condition may be violated, resulting in the higher wage if the federal and state requirements differ. By leveraging Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and/or Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding for community solar projects, organizations working on these projects can then utilize the Commonwealth Workforce Transformation Program to assist with workforce development and on-the-job training. The increase in demand for qualified workers and associated workforce development needs can create opportunities for in-state training and apprenticeship programs to flourish⁷, resulting in a stronger statewide workforce as well as a successful workforce development program.

Conclusion

In short, enabling community solar via House Bill 1842 will maximize federal funding opportunities in Pennsylvania while providing equitable access to the benefits of solar energy by local communities and building the statewide workforce.

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1. <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/community-solar-basics>
 2. <https://www.energy.gov/communitysolar/community-power-accelerator-tm>
 3. <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy09osti/44073.pdf>
 4. <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy18osti/70477.pdf>
 5. <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy11osti/49930.pdf>
 6. <https://www.utilitydive.com/news/gas-power-plants-reliability-winter-union-concerned-scientists/704031/>
 7. <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy23osti/84247.pdf>