

As I See It: Pols turn down the dimmer on solar

By Brian Kopperl
and Robert M. Knowles

Posted Feb. 2, 2016 at 6:00 AM

The rhetoric over solar power at the State House has been going on since last summer – and here in Central Massachusetts, the inaction is having a sharp, negative impact.

The legislative inaction on solar policy in the Commonwealth means that projects throughout Central Mass., including our community shared solar project in Bolton, are completely stalled.

Our company, Renewable Energy Massachusetts, is ready to begin construction now on a \$6 million, 11,000-panel solar project that is fully permitted, privately financed and literally shovel ready. The 2.5 megawatt project would generate enough clean energy for the next 30 years to power over 400 homes. Ours is a community shared solar net metering project, which will provide long-term electricity savings to hundreds of residential customers and the project host site business of Bolton Orchards.

The community shared solar program is an ideal solution to get solar benefits to the majority of residential customers who otherwise cannot place panels on their homes because of poor roof conditions or tree shading impacts. Not only customers would benefit if our project gets built, as the Town of Bolton would realize substantial annual tax revenues under a 25-year tax agreement approved in May 2015 at the annual town meeting. Furthermore, dozens of good-paying solar industry and construction jobs hang in the balance pending a legislative solution that would allow the Bolton Community Shared Solar Project to move forward to construction this spring.

Private investment in hand, permits received, locals ready to benefit, and jobs ready to be filled – all hung up. Why? Because legislators at the State House cannot agree on how many megawatts of solar facilities should be allowed to connect to the grid in Massachusetts and receive net metering credits, nor on what price solar energy facilities should be compensated for delivering clean, locally-sourced energy to the grid.

The governor and leaders in the House and the Senate all agree that the cap that currently exists on net metering needs to be lifted. Each of them has submitted a bill that raises the net metering caps. However, with significant differences among them on how to value solar energy in our state, they continued to disagree throughout the spring, and then battled all summer, fall and now well into winter. One bill passed the Senate last July, another passed the House in November, and the committee in charge of working out the differences between the bills hasn't even gotten together to meet in weeks.

Our project and the stalled benefits of local jobs, energy savings and tax revenues for the host community is not alone. The Telegram & Gazette recently showcased details of a stalled project by the Mohegan Council Boy Scouts of America on its property in Rutland which is costing several area nonprofits up to \$75,000 a year in lost energy savings due to the same legislative logjam.

More than 1,400 solar projects are currently stalled in Massachusetts. The publicly available list of stalled public and private projects includes four projects in Bolton alone, and 20 more public and private projects stalled in Worcester, five in Uxbridge, two in Auburn, and the list goes on throughout the Commonwealth.

The net metering caps have placed an undue burden on community shared solar projects throughout the state. In National Grid and Unitil service territory, which constitutes more than half of the state, hundreds of projects are unable to move forward – even after months of planning and investment.

This couldn't come at a worse time for Massachusetts.

The failure to act threatens Massachusetts' leadership stake in a strong, growing and innovative industry, while also risking solar investment capital will move elsewhere to lower policy-risk states from New York to California.

The solar industry has seen miraculous growth during the last three years, far outpacing job growth in the overall economy (by 12 times), creating 16,000 good-paying jobs in Massachusetts. In total 33 percent more solar jobs existed in 2014 than the year before according to the recent National Solar Jobs Census by the Solar Foundation. All that continued growth is now at risk.

The Legislature must act quickly to break its impasse and raise the net metering cap immediately,

keeping the solar industry working and growing, while embracing this proven energy technology that benefits ratepayers, taxpayers and our economy.

Massachusetts didn't become a national leader in solar overnight. It took a commitment from community, business and political leaders to make it a priority in passing the Green Communities Act of 2008, which launched net metering and the solar industry in our state. It also took thousands of Massachusetts residential, commercial and municipal energy buyers from solar projects to demand it.

It's time to make those in the State House Gov. Baker, our state representatives and senators – hear the need for an immediate solution that ends the current logjam while also delivering a fair and reliable policy for the future.

Brian Kopperl, managing partner, and Robert M. Knowles, managing director, are cofounders of Renewable Energy Massachusetts, a Cambridge-based solar energy development company that has developed several large-scale operating solar projects throughout the Commonwealth.

Published online at: <http://m.telegram.com/article/20160202/OPINION/160209946>