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## Autumn Long: WV needs lawmakers to adopt pro-growth solar strategy (Gazette Opinion)

By Autumn Long 9 hrs ago



Long

Last week in the Charleston Gazette-Mail, your editorial posed a question: [“If renewable energy catches up faster than expected, is WV ready to benefit?”](#) The answer: Not yet – but it could be. And more West Virginians could be benefiting from solar right now, through third-party financing.

It is no longer necessary to speculate whether or when renewable energy will reach economic parity with fossil fuels. That reality is happening today. Our energy system is rapidly changing. The last century’s wasteful, cumbersome, centralized system powered by fossil fuels and dominated by outsized special interests is evolving into an efficient, distributed structure in which ordinary people are no longer relegated to the role of passive consumers. Rather, we can become active energy producers in a resilient, fair and more affordable energy system.

West Virginians will be left behind if our elected officials do not act quickly and assertively to create a policy environment that encourages growth, competition and diversification in this newly unfolding energy system. While neighboring states attract major investments, expand their tax bases and create thousands of new jobs in the renewable energy sector, our state offers little to encourage innovative entrepreneurship or entice large employers that increasingly demand access to renewable energy.

If West Virginia dumps all its eggs into the basket of gas, it will be repeating the same disastrous mistake that has left our public coffers overly dependent on, and exposed to the vagaries of, a single extractive industry – coal – for the past century. History will repeat itself as the latest shale gas boom turns bust and renewables take center stage as the backbone of a new energy economy.

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The good news is that our lawmakers can take specific steps to encourage renewable energy development and investment in West Virginia. Chief among them is legalizing solar Power Purchase Agreements, a popular solar financing method that is available in 26 states, as well as Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

A solar PPA is a contract through which a third-party developer installs a solar array on a host customer's property, and the customer purchases electricity produced by the array at a fixed rate.

Widely used by commercial businesses and tax-exempt institutions like schools, churches, hospitals and municipalities, solar PPAs allow energy consumers to install solar with zero upfront cost while lowering electric bills from day one.

Regrettably, solar PPAs are illegal in West Virginia. Meanwhile, our monopoly electric utility companies are guaranteed a rate of return on their investments, and consumer electric rates continue to rise. By legalizing solar PPAs, the Legislature would open the door to economic growth, investment and job creation in West Virginia.

Entrepreneurs could install solar arrays on our state's businesses, manufacturing facilities, schools, hospitals and government buildings. Low-income families could access stable, affordable electricity rates through community solar projects, where customers buy a "share" of the energy produced by a centrally located solar array. Large-scale solar projects could be developed on former mine land, brownfields and other degraded sites, bringing good local jobs and investment to West Virginia communities.

Legalizing solar PPAs should attract widespread bipartisan support from our state lawmakers. This policy is pro-jobs, pro-competition, pro-growth and pro-business. It is a linchpin needed for a stronger and more diversified economic future in West Virginia.

It's up to our state's lawmakers to take a true leadership position and embrace a future powered by a diverse mix of energy sources in which renewables play leading roles. History, and future generations, will judge us by the decisions we make today.

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Autumn Long, of Harrison County, is West Virginia program director for Solar United Neighbors.