

Oliver Baines III: Don't let the sun set on Fresno's solar success

By Oliver Baines

III

When I look around at the community I serve, I am truly inspired by the progress we have made building stronger neighborhoods and improving our economy with clean, reliable, affordable solar power. But now Fresno's shining solar success story may be at risk.

By the end of the year, state regulators at the California Public Utilities Commission will decide whether to preserve one of our state's most important solar policies — a program called “net metering” that makes sure customers who go solar receive full credit on their utility bills for the clean power they send the grid. It may not sound like much, but net metering is quietly transforming our energy system for the better.

In just the four years that I've been serving on the City Council, solar has gone from a novelty to a mainstream energy option. Impressive recent declines in the cost of solar technology mean that Fresno's families, schools and businesses are increasingly putting our plentiful sunshine to work producing their own electricity.

This local solar power is helping reduce the need for expensive and polluting traditional power plants, savings that benefit us all. Fresno may have historically suffered some of the worst air quality in the country, but solar gives me hope that my daughter and granddaughter will have clean air to breathe.

It's also helping reduce strain on another resource that is critical to the vitality of our community: water. Traditional electricity production from sources like natural gas and nuclear is a water-intensive business. By using sunshine instead, the average California household that goes solar reduces water use by about 1,600 gallons a year. And in drought times like these, every drop counts.

Solar is having a direct impact on the economic strength of our community as well. Local solar installations keep energy dollars invested in our neighborhoods, improving energy infrastructure and supporting jobs.

Today our solar industry employs over 2,000 local residents, and I want to see that number grow so that we can continue providing quality, lasting jobs right here in Fresno. I want our young people to have opportunities in a solar workforce that provides good wages and a brighter future for us all.

Our community is building this better energy system one rooftop at a time, and I'm proud to serve on a city government that is leading by example.

Our award-winning solar installation at the Municipal Service Center is lowering harmful pollution, reducing strain on our electric grid, and saving our city more than \$4 million over its lifetime. Those precious dollars can now be put toward critical services for our community rather than electric bills.

Major solar energy projects at Fresno State and Fresno Yosemite International airport are delivering similar benefits. It's exciting progress, but we can do more.

Through rooftop solar, we have the chance to empower consumers like never before and create a clean energy opportunity strong enough to lift up all members of our community. One of the most exciting aspects of our net metering law is that it requires the state to develop new options for connecting solar with more of the disadvantaged families who need those savings most. This process is currently underway at the CPUC.

Our state and local leaders should continue to explore innovative ways to expand solar access to more of our residents and businesses, and that starts by preserving the solar programs that are already working for Fresno.

That's why I've joined more than 50 local officials from across our great state to urge the CPUC to protect net metering and build on our solar success.

Let's create more opportunities for our community to harness the power of the sun.

Oliver L. Baines III is president of the Fresno City Council, representing District Three.