

SOLAR ENERGY NOT ‘A BETTER MOUSETRAP’

by Stan Wise

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08-28-08 -- delegate stan wise -- Stan Wise, one of the Cobb delegates to the Republican National Covention. PHOTO BY THINH D. NGUYEN

An adage as old as the sun is “build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door.” Actually, Ralph Waldo Emerson also included advancements in book writing, pig farming, and chair- and organ-making in his list of products that the market would reward if innovation improved on an outdated idea. On that theme the Oct. 2 MDJ story titled, “Georgia Power wants to add fee to solar-powered customers” deserves some factual evaluation.

The article audaciously opens with “Sunlight is free.” A catchy phrase, but misleading at best. Not communicated in the article is the additional intrinsic requirement for is a vast and expensive energy infrastructure to ensure reliable and affordable electricity to a modern economy. Distributed solar generation can never exclusively provide for such needs, and it is hardly free. It is a little like suggesting that groundwater is free ... but try drinking a glass without ongoing investment in pipes and pumps and power to get it to your tap.

Solar has its place in Georgia’s energy mix. However, who among us when shopping for a car would buy the one that cranks only 18 percent of the time on the whims of a natural cycle like sun shine? And if you wanted to be assured of reliable “transportation,” wouldn’t you also need to buy a second car that would crank when needed? Such complex integration is the nature of effective electricity policy.

Industry and economic development prospects and an energized modern economy must have 24/7 instantaneous access to electricity. Think about that next time you get in an elevator. This is accomplished

by having a suite of energy producing sources like hydro and solar and coal and nuclear and natural gas, all integrated into a complex energy grid hardwired to every Georgia energy consumer. Not an outdated mousetrap, but rather a marvel on modern engineering.

The cost of this infrastructure is born by those who use it through the sale of electricity. Even if you are on vacation for an extended period, a base charge contributes to the cost of having service there when you need it. Not unlike the nation's roadway interstate system, where users invest in build out and maintenance to make a modern economy move, so too with our electrical grid.

Georgia Power has proposed to the Public Service Commission that there be a small infrastructure support fee charged to consumers that no longer cover their infrastructure maintenance and back-up costs because of their conversion to solar energy. The fundamental question before the PSC is if solar energy users are not covering the cost for back-up electricity, then who should?

The PSC is in the middle of evaluating, among other things, the appropriateness and equity of charging solar users such a backup fee. There are more hearings to be had on the topic, but here are the questions Georgia and other states, as well, that are considering such fees must answer. And these are the questions I will be asking as the hearings proceed.

What is the value of backup energy to consumers that only call on it when their solar panels don't operate? Are infrastructure costs being shifted to non-solar users because of the reduced sales of energy to those with panels? Why are states like California, Arizona and Hawaii looking to implement extra fees to solar users? Could there be a dampening of solar innovation if such a solar backup fee is charged here? Is it equitable to shift maintenance and backup costs to those low on the income scale who can't afford their own solar panels?

By 2016, Georgia will have one of the largest renewable portfolios in the country — up to 2.4 GW, all equitably brought into the state's energy mix without mandates or selective cross-subsidies. The renewable energy, including solar, wind, biomass and hydro, will be enough to power more than half a million homes. With that in mind, the PSC will review the proposed tariff and determine if it follows our regulatory model as renewables become a greater percentage of what energizes Georgia. (For example, once we finish Vogtle Units 3&4, the total capacity of all four units will be approximately 2300 megawatts).

In summary, solar is not a better mouse trap. It is at best a supplemental source of energy that will not replace the modern grid that makes our economy work. I hope to see the world beat a path to Georgia's door, but that won't happen unless there is reliable and affordable energy for all, paid for equitably by all.

Stan Wise of east Cobb serves on the Georgia Public Service Commission.