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Recently, I was the swing vote on the Georgia Public Service Commission in blocking a solar subsidy that would have appeared on the electric bills of more than 2 million Georgia Power customers — for 20 years. Since that vote, many people have asked me to reconsider, and to support the measure. While it was very tempting, I just could not make peace with the decision to increase rates.

My initial vote against the solar subsidy surprised many, because I have solar energy at my home. Also, I organized the “Solar Express” train ride in South Georgia, and have tirelessly promoted Georgia solar companies and existing solar arrays. In fact, this summer, by a vote of 5-0, I joined the other four Public Service Commission members to create a 50-megawatt solar program — without a subsidy. I was fine with that. This program will deploy in 2015, boosting our total solar portfolio.

But when it came time for me to vote on modifying this plan and adding a subsidy on ratepayers’ bills in order to accelerate the solar deployment, the pledge I made to Georgians to keep their rates low, promote free-market systems, and keep government interference at a minimum kept echoing in my mind.

Those three guiding principles would be violated if I supported the subsidy.

The most tempting moment came when the solar development companies who won the bid promised to use Georgia panels instead of Chinese panels if I changed my vote. That offer caused me to lose some sleep. However, the guiding principles I outlined to voters kept coming back up.

First, I had to ask myself whether the ratepayer subsidy was right for Georgia consumers, not just the companies that would benefit. Based on information from the consumer groups that contacted me about this, it was not a good idea.

I also asked myself whether all other reasonable options have been exhausted. In this case, the bid process is just beginning, and other solar developers in the queue believe they should have a shot before we add a subsidy. So, we must be patient and let the bid process run its course, as Commissioners Stan Wise and Chuck Eaton have suggested.

Another issue is whether the subsidy could improve the business climate in Georgia. A solar subsidy might have some benefit on our “green” image and temporarily help a few companies, but the precedent set by raising rates without a hearing creates controversy regarding the integrity of the PSC’s rate hearing process.

A related question is whether the subsidy would mean more jobs for Georgia. Certainly it will, because the two solar developers have signed a document in

front of me pledging to use Georgia companies. This almost won me over, but is it enough by itself?

Finally, I had to consider whether the timing is right for this decision. With the solar market so volatile right now, and prices dropping rapidly, I hesitate to obligate residential ratepayers for 20 years with a subsidy.

So what can we do to bring more solar energy to Georgia? I believe we must continue to bring ideas to the table because of the fixed-cost nature of solar energy. It has no pollution, no spills, and uses no water.

So, can power companies utilize solar on their existing plant sites, avoiding costly construction for interconnecting and transmitting? Can we tweak our metering statutes and give power companies an incentive to allow bidirectional metering, thus producing more distributed generation? Can homeowners and businesses work with power companies and have solar systems installed and financed on their property such that both parties benefit? And, can Georgia Power promote its current “green energy” program aggressively and increase participation, triggering the building of more solar infrastructure in Georgia?

With increasing government regulations of coal, natural gas fracking and nuclear energy, we must figure out how to make solar energy work in our state as a hedge against government interference.

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