

# Solar power means jobs, development

**W**hen I saw a solar company at the top of Atlanta Business Chronicle's list of the fastest-growing private companies, I realized how big solar might be for Georgia. The growing solar industry is not just about funky collectors on a roof or left-leaning environmentalists who hate fossil fuel. It is about skilled jobs in manufacturing and construction, about economic development in Georgia, about consumers saving money on their power bill so they can spend it somewhere else, and about empowering people to essentially create their own power plant.

And that is why I am putting together the "Solar Express" on July 29 and inviting Georgians to join me in Cordele and board the SamShortline, the state's excursion train, to learn more about solar power through a rolling seminar and day of education for the whole family. This vintage passenger train will have one entire train car of solar displays and interactive learning opportunities with whistle-stop press conferences all along the way as it travels west through Americus, Leslie and eventually Plains in rural southwest Georgia.

This is personal for me. I have solar on my Athens home and use it to heat my

hot water, which my family of nine uses a lot of. All my life I have watched smart people come up with some ingenious solutions to the problems we face, and in time the price of these inventions will come down. I remember when Texas Instruments calculators were outrageously expensive and my Compaq laptop needed a small hand truck to wheel it around. I remember paying \$1,500 for a car phone in 1985 that could not leave the car. Such is the case with energy technology, I think.

Solar is growing with companies like Mage coming from Germany to Georgia to manufacture solar systems and train people how to install them. South Georgia Technical College, Gwinnett Tech and Savannah Tech are offering "Solar PV 101" this fall to teach their technical college students how to install and service Solar Photo Voltaic, the type of panel that converts the sun's rays into electricity.

Power Partners Solar of Athens is manufacturing and installing solar hot water heating systems for customers around the globe, including my house. Suniva does both research and manufacturing of sophisticated photovoltaic solar cell technology. All this means jobs for Georgians — both in the manufacturing and service sectors.



**VIEWPOINT**  
**Tim Echols**

Fortune 500 companies, enterprising consumers, and energy-conscious farms and businesses are the early adopters of this technology. Their purchase of this technology, albeit at higher prices, is helping to bring down the price for the rest of us — just like in the infancy of mobile phones. Panels are coming down in cost, and stockholders continue to appreciate diversity in an energy portfolio.

I like the fact that Georgia Power allows customers to utilize solar technology on a voluntary basis. Customers can buy a block of green energy for about \$3.50 per month. This power, generated through renewable sources like biomass or solar, helps the utility build the infrastructure to capture this more expensive form of energy. Such programs encourage greater investment in renewable energy without forcing uninterested customers to participate.

As solar comes down in price, I hope more and more Georgians will take advantage of this ever-growing home-grown technology and the supply chain that it spawns. Meanwhile, go to [www.samshortline.com](http://www.samshortline.com) and get tickets for you and your family on the Solar Express, July 29. All aboard!

**Echols** is a commissioner with the Georgia Public Service Commission.