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CAN A TEXAS SOLAR PLAN BE A BRIGHT IDEA FOR MAINE?

Since solar panels are costly to install, well-heeled utility customers have largely been the ones to put them up. This has stalled the growth of solar power and tended to concentrate its installation in certain areas.

CPS Energy in San Antonio aims to change this model, making solar power available to middle- and low-income residents of the Texas city. City residents can rent their rooftops for the installation of solar panels. Local solar contractors perform the installation work, and CPS buys the electricity. The solar companies, not homeowners, would receive tax credits or other incentives.

Participants will receive about \$30 per month for a 20-year lease in the form of a credit on their utility bill. In this way, residents quickly see the benefit of solar installation without the large upfront costs of traditional solar panel installation because CPS and the installers bear those costs. When it launched the program earlier this month, the company hoped to sign up 2,000 customers. That many had applied in the program's first three days, according to Slate. That's also the same number of customers who had installed rooftop solar during the previous seven years when the utility used the net metering model, which allows customers to sell excess electricity to the grid.

This allows CPS, which is municipally owned, to increase its solar collection footprint without building large, often hard-to-site solar farms — although it is working with solar companies to build those, too. Unlike Maine utilities, CPS can generate its power, not just buy it from other companies.

The utility has 100 megawatts of installed solar capacity, 20 megawatts of which is in the form of rooftop solar. Renewable energy accounts for 16 percent of

the company's electricity generation. It also sells natural gas. In its sustainability report for 2011-13, CPS notes that its carbon dioxide emission rate has dropped even as it has generated more electricity.

CPS residential customers will pay an average of 11.1 cents per kilowatt hour for their electricity this month. This rate includes adjustments for the purchase (or sale) of solar power, along with wind power and landfill gas. It also includes a surcharge to support energy efficiency work. Rates are not expected to increase in San Antonio until 2018, in part because the utility produces more electricity than its customers use.

Residential customers of Central Maine Power Co. have been paying 12.87 cents per kilowatt hour since March 2015; Emera customers in the former Bangor Hydro territory are paying \$16.74, according to the Office of the Public Advocate. These rates include a surcharge to support the Efficiency Maine Trust.

Because every utility customer pays into Efficiency Maine, it is important to find ways for all customers to benefit from work that improves energy efficiency and lowers costs, says Tim Schneider, Maine's public advocate. There are significant upfront costs to switching to a more efficient furnace or fuel source, or installing solar panels — even with rebates or tax credits. So, the customers with the most financial resources tend to do this work. The CPS model is attractive because it spreads the benefits to a broader financial demographic.

But with a very different utility landscape in Maine, the San Antonio model can't simply be imported. Instead, what has happened there can inform new approaches to encouraging greater adoption of renewable power sources here.

OTHER VOICES

RATING YOUR COLLEGE INVESTMENT

Chances are that for many Americans, the cost of going to college or sending their children to college will be among the things they will spend the most money on. But unlike other instances involving a substantial amount of money, there has not been a reliable way to determine the return on the investment. That may have benefited colleges and universities but not those footing the bill. So a new effort by President Barack Obama's administration to provide useful data to prospective students, while not perfect, is certainly a welcome step.

Obama last week unveiled a consumer-oriented website run by the Education Department detailing annual costs, graduation rates, salaries after graduation and other information for more than 7,000 institutions of higher education. By providing access to extensive federal data (including the first combining of the federal student aid database with tax information), the College Scorecard allows students and their families to compare and sort institutions based on a variety of measurements. Which schools have a graduation rate higher than 75 percent? What's the median salary for alumni from the school 10 years after entering? What's the college's typical undergraduate student debt?

The scorecard doesn't rate schools, a retreat from plans Obama announced two years ago that would also have threatened colleges and universities performing poorly with the loss of

federal student aid money. No doubt that's because of widespread pushback from college officials, who put up a smoke screen of objections — most notably that education isn't a commodity that can be measured by earning potential — to avoid being held accountable for the job they do.

Ratings might have made it a bit easier to get a quick fix on a school, but there are advantages in how the administration has set up this user-friendly website. Students look for different things from their college years, so the scorecard gives them the tools to get the information most important to them rather than a static score based on someone else's priorities. All the data is open and that will allow researchers, college search organizations and the media to use the material and provide further analysis, as has already occurred with ProPublica's examination of affordability and debt for low-income students.

Administration officials acknowledge there are still some gaps in the data. Graduation rates, for example, are based on first-time, full-time students and don't include part-time or returning students. And earnings don't include differentiations among occupations. The hope is for continuous improvement and refinement of the site. But any questions about the need to provide this information can be put to rest with its use the first four days after its launch: There were 3.7 million page views.

The Washington Post (Sept. 17)



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Plastic bag use

I am appalled by the amount of plastic bags stuffed with merchandise that comes out of big-box stores. Faced by the increasing amount of plastic in landfills and even the ocean, I believe every store has a duty to do whatever it can to halt this toxic invasion — especially a popular store like Wal-Mart.

Although the company has created attractive inexpensive cloth shopping bags, nothing is done to promote their use. They are not hanging at any of the checkout stations. They are hanging at the front of the store. At the exit, not the entrance. I would like to suggest that one of their kindly greeters stand with bags in hand and hand them out to everyone who comes in.

I also suggest that one day a ban/or tax will be levied on them to discourage their use.

Anna Freeman
Athens

Islamic brutality

No weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq. So what? Saddam Hussein had to go. He was a brutal dictator who gassed his own people, ignored United Nations sanctions and enriched himself and his family by diverting funds needed for his people into building more palaces. For the BDN to blame the Iraq war for all the things in its Sept. 11 editorial, such as displaced Syrians and then drawing a straight line from the war to the birth of ISIS and their atrocities, only shows the BDN's naivete about the history of Islam. Whether you want to call them ISIS, IS or whatever, all these groups follow the same beliefs: the destruction of anyone who does not believe as they do.

Mohammed did not write the Quran, as many believe. It was compiled after his death by men who had written down his teachings. Mohammed's first teachings in the seventh century were conducted in Mecca. These early teachings talk of peace. When he moved to Medina —

both locations are in Saudi Arabia — his teachings were more about destroying any who did not believe as he did, specifically the “people of the book” (Jews and Christians). In the study of the Quran there is a principle called “naskh,” which means the later verses negate anything said before.

This worldwide terror has nothing to do with the Iraq war. It has been around since the seventh century.

Ron McArdle
Presque Isle

WRITE TO US

Letters must be 250 words or fewer and include a full name, town of residence and daytime phone number. OpEds may be 700 words. Letters may be edited or rejected for clarity, taste, libel and space. If a letter or OpEd is published, submissions by the same writer will not be considered for 60 days.

Letters may be sent to letters@bangordailynews.com. OpEds may be sent to OpEd@bangordailynews.com or P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, ME 04402-1329.

Help one another

Hopefully, the Middle Eastern countries will step forward and rescue their destitute refugees from unholy turmoil and misery. There is land and there are resources and, I truly think, responsibility. But, yes, everyone needs to step up; every one of us is, after all, a member of the human race.

The terrible mystery is why governance in general makes it so easy for despots to remain in power? Why is the rule of law ineffectual? Why are human rights empty, disregarded words rattling around in the wastebaskets of leadership? Why is power used to destroy instead of build instead of help? Instead of lead?

I want to believe that all this overwhelming evil, greedy, self-serving, vindictive, heartlessness and despotic thought and action will not finally wipe out the positive power of “good and true.” Is there hope?

We need to care, share, listen, learn and love. Each voice, each cry could be our own.

Dottie Hayes
Brooklin

Vote Bernie

For years, local listeners of radio station WZON have heard Tom Hartmann regularly interview Vermont senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders on a host of issues. His common sense and progressive views are persuasive and clearly articulated.

But it's Sanders' approach to foreign policy and to the use of American military power that's especially prudent. In the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, he was among a handful of senators who voted against U.S. involvement. Assessing carefully the intelligence about Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and predicting the possible consequences of his overthrow, Sanders foresaw a Middle East in chaos and the horrific loss of American and Iraqi lives.

In fact, politicians such as Hillary Clinton who vote to send other parents' kids into harm's way, after considering only superficially the reasons for doing so, should disqualify themselves from further elected office. Contrary to her claim during the 2008 campaign, she's not the most competent one to take a 3 a.m. phone call from the Joint Chiefs of Staff after her failure to detect the false pretenses under which the Iraq war was fought.

Sanders stated in a recent CNN interview that the U.S. should always emphasize diplomacy in conflict situations and employ force as a last resort and then in concert with allies whenever possible. Fighting for the middle-class and working people — major sources of members of our military — has been a hallmark of Bernie's senatorial career. I believe he deserves our vote in the upcoming Maine caucuses.

David Witham
Bangor

.COMMENTS

OpEd contributor, Todd Bryant, “How Maine is looking to hold public officials accountable”:

As much sense as Bryant's position makes he's missing the most important point of all, that being ethics in public service. Roger Katz's ethics panel's work is in very large part a much-needed component of what Bryant proposes.

—Mike Kiernan

I don't see how this proposed system, in actuality, “safeguards” the public when it

seems to only be outcome based, instead of “oversight” based. Secondly, it also seems to be accountability based only to “rules of the entity,” not rules of the law. This proposal doesn't seem very well and far enough thought out to be considered a true and viable “safeguard” for the public.

—chickadee_crow

No surety company would sell a bond to LePage. That's for sure.

—newaunts

OpEd contributor, Robert W.

Glover, “GOP presidential candidates dig their own electoral graves on immigration”:

Immigration? It's illegal immigration people have a problem with. There are people waiting patiently, every day, to get in. No one should be able to jump ahead illegally.

—d lew

So the good old boys Democrat network has finally been exposed by Gov. Paul LePage. No wonder he gets bashed weekly by the ultra liberal Democrat leaning press.

—Kaliss

DOONESBURY



GARRY TRUDEAU