

Sky's the Limit for Rooftop Solar Power

Op-ed

By MARY LESLIE

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Not long ago, the idea of a vast array of solar panels in the heart of the city of Los Angeles was a far-fetched idea. Now, thanks to energized political leadership and the discovery of thousands of acres of potential solar farms on the rooftops of Los Angeles, the dream of substantial solar development is about to be realized. This new solar era for the city will benefit local residents, and the business community has a lot to be excited about.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power commissioners earlier this month adopted a resolution to proceed with the city's first-ever solar Feed-in-Tariff (FiT) program, whereby the utility will purchase up to 150 megawatts of solar power generated on the rooftops of businesses and multifamily buildings.

The resolution adopted by the DWP commission followed a unanimous City Council vote on the same program and came days after Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa signed the council-approved ordinance into law.

The Los Angeles Business Council has been a strong advocate for the FiT program – or Clean LA Solar, as we like to call it – and has worked with environmental groups, community-based organizations and our local universities to make this happen for environmental and business reasons.

A solar FiT can accrue significant benefits for the city. For starters, the development of up to 150 megawatts of locally harvested rooftop solar will help DWP achieve the renewable energy goals as mandated by Assembly Bill 32. DWP, like other utilities in California, must meet a 33 percent renewable portfolio standard by 2020.

And the more rooftop solar we have, the less reliant we will be on polluting energy sources, including DWP's coal-fired power plants in Utah and its natural gas plants closer to home. Generating clean power locally versus importing coal-fired power is cleaner, more energy efficient and good public policy.

Economic tool

But for the business community, the power of the FiT as an economic development tool cannot be understated. Over the next several years, owners of buildings with large rooftops will have the opportunity to install enough solar farms to create 150 megawatts of power. Experts believe that a 600 megawatt program could be up and running in five years.

An LABC-sponsored study by UCLA found that a 600 megawatt FiT could result in 18,000 green jobs; spur \$2 billion in investment; and produce long-term cost savings for businesses, ratepayers and the DWP. UCLA's researchers found that Los Angeles has enough rooftop space to produce up to 5 gigawatts of rooftop solar in Los Angeles. That is a significant number when considering that a 600 megawatt program could power 137,000 typical L.A. households.

With a robust FiT, combined with its solar potential, Los Angeles can become a true business center for the U.S. solar industry. We have the market power to make it happen and it appears we now have the political will. And as the amount of rooftop solar installations increases, we can certainly expect to see economies of scale kick in, making solar even more affordable.

When it comes to economic development in Los Angeles, our plentiful sunshine has helped drive the multibillion-dollar travel industry. Now, it appears those rays of sun may be able to power another potent industry sector: solar. The newly adopted FiT is a terrific step in farming locally grown electricity and building a robust solar industry right here at home.

Mary Leslie is the president of the Los Angeles Business Council.