

Our Opinion: Solar power not 'free,' but Tucson has sunny future

Tucson Citizen

July 11, 2007

Solar energy most assuredly isn't "free," as one Tucson official averred last week, but it can pay for itself eventually. More important, solar marks another step toward energy independence and away from nonrenewable, "dirty" power sources that contribute to global warming.

So while taxpayers subsidize solar in Tucson, we can think of worse subsidies, such as those long provided to the oil companies.

However, as Tucson revs up its use of solar, tapping federal grants and other tax dollars, we urge private companies and utilities to make more such investments.

Tucson Electric Power Co. offers residential incentives including up to \$2,000 per kilowatt and a "buydown" rebate of up to \$3,000, depending on qualifications. Consumers can tap subsidies to install solar panels and ultimately break even on energy - and even sell excess power back to TEP.

Such offers aren't purely altruistic; they also will help utilities meet an Arizona Corporation Commission mandate set last year.

ACC ordered power companies to boost their share of renewable energy sources from 1.1 percent this year to 15 percent by 2025. TEP already gets some electricity from solar panels in northeast Arizona.

We support the ACC mandate and appreciate the efforts made by utilities such as TEP.

More investment in solar is needed by private agencies, such as the \$25,000 spent on solar panels by the Center for Biological Diversity in April to halve the monthly electric bill at its Tucson office while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Solar is gaining traction, particularly in Tucson, where 136 kilowatts of photovoltaic generation today is expected to increase by 6,200 kilowatts over the next several years.

The average home takes 7.1 kilowatts to power, so today's generation of 136 can supply the equivalent of 19 homes, and the additional expected 6,200 can supply another 870 homes.

That's good news, but growth in solar power requires two things that now are lacking, U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords told the Tucson Citizen Editorial Board in a meeting Monday:

? Certified solar installers are in short supply, and community colleges must begin training more of them.

? Battery technology to store solar-generated power energy must be improved. Giffords has asked the Department of Energy to support research in this area.

The new emphasis on solar energy in Tucson and nationally is a promising trend that bodes well for our environment and our pocketbooks.

As taxpayers' dollars are tapped, money must be invested by businesses and utilities to ensure the rapid acceleration of solar energy use.