



GUEST COLUMN

Solar power wins a convert

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By Tim Echols

Solar power has forever been swimming upstream toward the mainstream – which is exactly where it needs to be situated in order to take off in a big way. This is important because swimming in the “mainstream” are Republicans, Democrats and, yes, shareholders of utility stock. All three are needed to move this energy forward in any significant way.

In the past, solar power has been viewed as a left-leaning venture, and Republicans have avoided any association with it. You might say it has been politically toxic.

But times are changing, and conservatives like me are recognizing that with solar power are skilled jobs in manufacturing and construction, economic development opportunities, savings on power bills, along with helping people or businesses to not even need the utility anymore. This last reason is especially appealing to tea party types who cherish independence and freedom.

I have solar thermal on my Athens home and use it to heat my hot water, which Georgia Power estimates at 17 percent of the average ratepayer's bill. Power Partners Solar of Athens, the company that manufactured and installed my system, is working through Walton EMC and Georgia Power to install more solar thermal for residential customers.

Suniva, in Norcross, does both research and manufacturing of sophisticated photovoltaic solar cell technology. Mage Solar, in Middle Georgia, has created a solar-powered electric car charging station consisting of 18 panels. All this means jobs for Georgians – both in the manufacturing and service sector.

Fortune 500 companies, enterprising consumers, and energy-conscious farms and businesses are the early adapters of this technology. Their purchase of this technology, albeit at higher prices, is helping to reduce the price for the rest of us – just like in the infancy of mobile phones. (In 1985, I paid \$1,500 to have a car phone that I could not even take out of my car.) The bottom line is that panels are coming down in cost, and utility shareholders continue to want diversity in an energy portfolio and are applying pressure to company leadership.

That is in part why I am putting together the “Solar Express” on Friday and inviting Georgians to join me in Cordele and board the SAM Shortline, 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 news conferences along the way as it travels west through Americus, Leslie and eventually Plains in rural southwest Georgia.

Developing a clean energy portfolio with more solar makes sense given the increasingly heavy hand of the federal government. I like the fact that Georgia Power allows customers to use 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 such as biomass or solar, helps the utility build the infrastructure to capture this more expensive form of energy. This program is growing our state's renewable energy without forcing uninterested customers to participate. Look for more and more solar projects to pop up across the state.

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 and get tickets for you and your family on the Solar Express, July 29. All aboard!

Tim Echols is a commissioner on the Georgia Public Service Commission.