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Pridemore promotes coal, nuclear power at Cartersville event

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BY JAMES SWIFT

Tricia Pridemore, Georgia's District 5 Public Service Commissioner, described just how much power Plant Bowen generates — not just for Bartow, but the entire state — at Wednesday's North Georgia Power Connectors luncheon at Taverna Mediterranean Grill in Cartersville.

"Fifteen seconds of it being fired up," she said, "the average home in Georgia has all of its electrification needs met for an entire year."

Indeed, Pridemore considered the local Georgia Power-operated facility to be one of the state's crown jewels in terms of energy production.

"Lots of folks tend to not be as crazy about coal as I am, but I see an entire nation that has been built off of coal energy," she said. "And I see an entire nation in an ecosystem that is around coal that touches so many different aspects of our lives."

Still, Pridemore said she could see the proverbial writing on the wall. It's only a matter of time, she said, until the federal government clamps down on coal ash waste storage, which is why the PSC is getting a jump on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and advocating its own requirements for the state's coal-burning facilities.

"So we've impressed upon Georgia Power by 2028 to look at a cap in place — dry field storage with an aligned bank," she said. "We'll have a few acres at Plant Bowen that is capped that way ... being aggressive with the way that we're changing our coal ash pond management and waste management is really going to put us ahead of what the feds are going to impress upon us to do."

She said the commission would much rather be proactive and spend less money now than play catch-up later on and spend significantly more capital bringing its plants up to standard.

"We've had administrations in the White House that have tried very hard to shut down coal," she said. "I think this is an opportunity for us to demonstrate how clean it is, how little waste comes out of the process and for communities that rely upon it not only for electrification and energy needs, but also as part of our economic development picture."

Pridemore described the PSC as a "quasi-judicial and quasi-legislative" body.

"We're the oldest state agency in the Georgia Constitution and it was established so that we could finish out the electrification of the state," she said. "We do all of the planning in and around energy, energy production, utilities, telecom — that is landline only — and railroads."

The state, she said, has a very different philosophy on energy production and management than western states like California or northeastern states like New York in that Georgia prioritizes the diversification of its energy portfolio.

"Based upon market conditions, we're always in a position to provide the lowest cost energy source to residents, a business or a manufacturing plant," she said. "We operate gas plants, nuclear plants and coal plants, including the largest in our fleet right here in Bartow County ... there are jobs and economic development attached to every piece of this string. The light bulb represents hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs all the way down the stream through this process."

That also includes investments in renewable and alternative energy sources, such as solar and biomass. And although the mountainous and hilly terrain makes wind energy economically unviable, she said Georgia nonetheless buys a portion of its energy portfolio from states like Texas and Oklahoma that have established wind energy operations "so that we can have a piece of that and take advantage of some federal tax credits."

Two days ago, Pridemore said she gave her approval to a green energy technology pilot program that would construct a single megawatt solar project along an Interstate 85 on-ramp close to the Georgia/Alabama line.

"Some states today, they come with a pre-packaged solar program — 'this is what you have to choose, this is what we'll do as a state,'" Pridemore said. "Not us. We let [companies] decide and we let those decisions drive how we attract them to come here to Georgia."

That played a part, she said, in Georgia landing Facebook as a site for one of its new data storage centers. "They want to get a certain percentage of their overall energy out of solar and we want to help them do it," she said. "So we provide them with the means to be able to solar-electrify that site and then it goes right into whatever their usage is."

As long as a potential development is larger than the average big-box store, Pridemore said the PSC allows developers to select their own energy provider.



"Customer choice is a value proposition that Georgia has that most states don't," she said. "When you're at an economic development discussion, trying to lure a business into our state, that's one of the prime tools that we can pull out of our tool bag."

As it stands now, she said about 16 percent of Georgia's base load power is driven by nuclear energy. Once two new reactors are completed at Plant Vogtle in Burke County — "in 2021 and 2022, respectively" — Pridemore said the percentage will increase to 25 percent.

"Nuclear is clean, it is carbon-free and it burns 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," she said. "That's critical for us as we look to expand in renewables and do some other things with the portfolio or to hedge against changes that might come out of Congress or might come out of the White House on Co2 emissions or other requirements out of maybe an activist EPA."

With 7,000 people on the ground everyday, Pridemore referred to the Plant Vogtle expansion as "the largest construction project in the country." Although the project has been fraught with setbacks and cost overruns — to the point it's five years behind schedule and its budget is now \$14 billion more than initially planned — she said she nonetheless believes the facility, which would be the first new nuclear power plant to go online in the United States in more than a quarter century, will be finished.

"A lot has been invested, not just in money, but also in time," she said. "These projects have sort of crested to where we're on the other side of the hill in terms of building them. We've kind of gotten to the point where they're so close to being finished within two and a half, three and a half years, let's just go ahead and see them on to completion."

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