

Opinion: Montgomery County Council declared a ‘climate emergency’ — then sabotaged a solar program

Opinion by Kumar P. Barve
March 5, 2021 at 9:00 a.m. EST

Talk is cheap.

Or, in the case of the Montgomery County Council, declaring a “climate emergency” and then sabotaging affordable clean energy.

This week, the council debated a bill to allot 2 percent of rural land for solar energy development under the state’s Community Solar Pilot Program, and then amended it to such an extent as to make it unfeasible.

Community Solar, a program approach that incentivizes developers to offer solar-based electric service to low- and middle-income customers, allows individuals, communities, nonprofits and others to buy in to solar energy without having property on which to build a solar installation. The original intent of the county’s bill was to increase the county’s solar resources for this program.

After the council [approved the drastically amended bill](#), two solar developers immediately withdrew from the plan. With the exception of the bill’s sponsor, Hans Riemer (D-At Large), and Council President Tom Hucker (D-District 5), fearful council members voiced the need to wait and see, with one suggesting a two-year study on whether to use the county’s agricultural reserve in this way. This is not the “radical change” the county called for back in 2017, when it declared a climate emergency.

As a legislative leader who has studied and worked on environmental issues over many years, I can tell you that Maryland doesn’t have time to wait, as fossil fuel use is the primary culprit behind climate change.

Also, let me be clear once and for all: Ground-based solar is the most cost-effective clean-energy alternative here. No matter how big the structure, rooftop solar cannot achieve the necessary economy of scale to bring its cost down — and is, in fact, three times more expensive than electricity generated by natural gas. Rooftop solar only makes economic sense with huge tax subsidies. As for wind farms, that is not an option in the county.

Solar panels in fields may seem like a bad idea compared to those on rooftops, but the economic analysis shows utility-scale solar panels in fields is the only type of power generation that middle-class people can afford. If we are serious about making

renewable energy an inexpensive replacement of fossil fuel energy, then we have to allow ground-mounted terrestrial solar energy.

Don't take my word for it. The annual Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis conducted by Lazard, an international investment firm, shows that as the cost of renewable energy continues to decline, certain technologies (e.g., onshore wind and utility-scale solar) became cost-competitive with conventional generation several years ago, and maintain competitiveness with the marginal cost of [existing conventional generation technologies](#).

Ultimately, the greatest resistance to using the agricultural reserve is the fear that ground-based solar will take over, that it will damage the farmland. Consider this: The panels used can be easily and cheaply removed in the future to return the land to industrial farming. The ground around and under the panels will grow indigenous plant species, provide grazing, and create an undisturbed habitat for pollinators. The land will lie fallow, and will not be treated with fertilizers or insecticides, thus improving the soil dramatically for the future.

With the exception of Riemer and Hucker, the council does not seem to grasp how responsible solar energy works. To be useful, a solar field has to be of a certain size and be near existing electric power lines. With the restrictions they have created, their actions amount to a termination of community solar.

As I witnessed the debate on this county legislation, [I warned](#) the council that “if a local government of Montgomery County’s stature and progressive reputation can turn its back on affordable community solar, other Maryland counties might likely follow suit.”

Already, that seems to be happening. Several counties are in the process of following Montgomery County’s example. Montgomery County’s action could set off a chain reaction of solar prohibitions.

How do we fix this? Let’s acknowledge that it takes more than declaring a “climate emergency” — and creating five climate work groups with 150 people and \$800,000 for consultants. The council should reverse this disastrous decision. They should move beyond pretentious bureaucratic responses and actively seek sites for community solar — while promoting soil conservation and complementary agricultural practices.

Let’s act like Montgomery County cares about global climate change.