The clean energy transition is underway, but Virginia residents, businesses and local governments are being left behind because of antiquated energy policy. Solar energy is a critical part of the transition to a clean energy economy, so it’s time to incentivize distributed solar and remove the barriers that are slowing Virginia’s progress!

The cheapest source of new power in Virginia is solar. Solar panels typically last up to 40 years and require little maintenance. Yet, distributed solar is lagging across our state. This is largely due to opposition from utilities like Dominion and its undue influence over Virginia politicians.

Virginia residents, businesses, and local governments should have the right to generate their own electricity and not be tied to dirty sources of power. Currently, those options are extremely limited or, as in most cases, impossible. There are many barriers to solar energy that exist in Virginia law now:

- Barriers to residential solar, including added fees known as “standby” charges that act like a tax or disincentive and major limits on “net metering”
- Barriers to local government solar, including the prohibition of using the electricity produced at one site to serve buildings at another site and limits on the use of budget-neutral financing
- Barriers to solar for businesses, such as restrictions on building owners selling solar output to tenants

Because of these barriers, rooftops, parking lots, airports and other spaces that could support solar panels are sitting idle and empty.

In other states, local governments are putting under-utilized land to work, saving money for taxpayers and putting funds toward schools and other local needs. Businesses are taking advantage of clean energy investments that make them more competitive, and more residents are powering their homes and farms with on-site or community solar.

In Fairfax County, the local government has been interested in installing a large solar array on its Lorton landfill for many years. Restrictive Virginia laws have stopped the county from installing and operating this solar farm in a way that is economically feasible.

How? Under current law, restrictions are placed on the size of the solar array and limits are placed on the credit the utility pays the county for excess electricity, thereby greatly limiting the economic viability of solar energy. Moreover, in contrast to states with booming solar markets, Virginia law greatly limits the availability of a financing approach (power purchase agreement) that would allow the county to construct the solar array without increased costs to county taxpayers.

Virginia could unleash hundreds of millions of dollars in private and public investment in clean energy across Virginia, creating thousands of new jobs. This is the local economic boost that our communities need, and everyone can benefit from.

Despite all its benefits, there are very few incentives for solar projects in Virginia. Across the country, states and localities are developing new
and improved ways to encourage residents, businesses, and governments to install solar. These initiatives can really change the game, and with the Commonwealth lagging so far behind in solar installations, incentives must be a part of the conversation.

Both Maryland and North Carolina have a myriad of solar incentives ranging from loan programs to utility rate discounts, and tax breaks.

In Virginia, we have a few programs to incentivize solar but they are often outweighed by the significant barriers that exist.

Among the worst anti-solar laws in Virginia is the "standby charge" that Dominion and APCO put into place to penalize homeowners with solar systems larger than 10 kilowatts.

How does this "standby charge" work? Let's take a look at an APCO customer, Naomi, who lives in Henry County, Virginia who has a 12 kW solar system on her home. That 12 kW system triggers the "standby charge" imposed by the utility. In the long days of summer especially, when she is generating more power than she needs, you'd think her bill would be smaller with just taxes and charges for transmitting electricity.

Instead, Naomi, who is retired and living on a fixed income, is penalized for generating electricity with a huge “standby charge” every month!

Currently, homeowners, businesses and local governments in Virginia are restricted from offering their excess supply of electricity to the grid.

Net metering allows owners of solar panels or other renewable energy generators to connect to the electric grid and provide their surplus electricity to others and offset their personal electricity costs with their electric utility. This way, solar owners are paid for surplus renewable electricity they generate.

Monopoly utility companies like Dominion Energy and Appalachian Power don’t want this practice allowed because it would jeopardize their profits and undermine their control over the electric supply in their territory.

A robust build-out of solar in our communities can spur more clean energy growth, improve electric grid resilience, reliability, and emergency preparedness, and reduce pollution for our children and future generations.

In the event of emergencies, distributed solar coupled with battery storage can provide essential power for shelters and other emergency service providers when the larger electric grid goes down. This dynamic duo can also replace the need for “peaker plants,” fossil fuel power plants that supply energy only when demand for electricity spikes.

“Community solar” options are also limited in Virginia. As the name implies, community solar allows a group of residents or businesses to purchase the solar from a nearby solar farm. It is ideal for those who rent or don’t have space suitable for solar on their own home or property to benefit. Only two community solar projects currently exist in the state. These projects are thanks to the willingness of two electric cooperatives to respond to their customers’ requests.

Distributed solar is integral to moving away from fossil fuels and towards a clean energy future. Taking advantage of this abundant, renewable energy resource will reduce pollution, create local jobs and limit electricity cost increases by helping to avoid the need for expensive new power plants. It is a win-win for our health and our economy.

Tell your public officials you want more solar in more places! Ask them to publicly speak in support of solar incentive programs and the removal of barriers that hold back distributed solar projects.

For more information visit vasierra.club/moresolarmoreplaces