

Opinion: The Pathway to Maryland's clean energy goals runs through county offices

By Guest Commentary October 27, 2023



Solar panels in a field in Darlington. Photo by Bryan P. Sears.

By Adam Dubitsky

The writer is state director of the Land & Liberty Coalition of Maryland.

A recent [Washington Post/University of Maryland poll](#) showed majorities of Republicans and Democrats “wouldn’t mind fields of solar panels and wind turbines being built in their communities.” This aligns with our experience in communities throughout Maryland and that of Land & Liberty Coalition chapters in more than a dozen states. The Post’s article accompanying the survey included an important caveat: The outsized impact of NIMBYism, where a handful of residents convince local officials to block a clean energy project in their backyard, or, as we’ve seen recently in Carroll and Anne Arundel counties, effectively ban them.

Adopting ambitious clean energy laws is the easy part in a deep blue state like Maryland and the hard work doesn’t end with bill signing ceremonies or congratulatory press releases by supporters; it begins there. The effort required to get a renewable power project into the ground and clean electrons into the grid takes place away from State House offices and the Annapolis fundraising circuit. It happens at late-night county planning and zoning hearings; in meetings with local stakeholders; and through taking the time to lay out the benefits of renewable energy while factually and politely addressing concerns and misinformation.

Maryland has among the most ambitious renewable portfolio standards in the nation with a “solar carveout” requiring 14.5% of its electricity to come from the sun by 2030. But due to NIMBYism running amok in blue and red counties alike this goal is now wildly optimistic. An estimated 600 megawatts of additional solar power are needed each year to hit the 2030 target, yet due largely to county restrictions on where projects can go, land lost to commercial and residential development, and years-long regulatory approvals, just over 200 megawatts per year is projected.

Thoroughly debunked claims by anti-solar activists notwithstanding, there are simply not enough viable roof tops, brownfields, reclaimed landfills, or industrial sites to meet solar targets. The only way to come close to meeting the 2030 target is to streamline permitting and allow solar on a larger portion of the state’s two million acres of private agricultural land — far less than 2% of it would more than meet the carveout while providing economic opportunity for landowners and their communities.

Those lobbying for making even more land off limits to solar are often suburban transplants who bought or built homes on what was previously farmland and who now have the audacity to insist that the government restrict what that farm family can do with the rest of their property. This was the case in Carroll County earlier this year where a small number of residents convinced the county commissioners to prohibit new community solar projects on agricultural land. The irony of this shortsighted ban is that farm families planning to lease or sell land for a solar facility may now have no other financial option than to sell to a real estate developer, resulting in a permanent loss of agricultural land.

Solar projects aren’t usually what comes to mind as a hedge against suburban sprawl, but it works. They don’t have kids or commute to work. They don’t flush the toilet or take showers. Nor do they wind up in handcuffs or the back of an ambulance. Yet these quiet temporary glass and steel neighbors provide much needed revenue to fund education, roads and sewers, first responders, and other priorities. And over a typical 25-year project lifespan without pesticides and fertilizer and ground compaction from farm equipment the land has time to heal, yielding more productive and valuable soils than before the panels were planted.

Anti-solar NIMBYism isn’t just a red county phenomenon, progressive Montgomery County is home to many of the state legislators who led the way on clean power legislation. Yet it is harder to build a solar power project in this dark blue county than in any other. And last month in purplish Anne Arundel County, a common-sense solar siting bill introduced at the request of the county executive would have eliminated one of the state’s most blatantly anti-solar regulations, a requirement that all solar facilities in the county be at least ten miles apart. Yet a small group of activists and their allies on the county’s Agriculture Commission who oppose any solar on undeveloped land successfully lobbied to not only keep the arbitrary 10-mile restriction but also tack on new restrictions. Adopted on Sept. 5, a county in which it was always difficult to build ground-mounted solar on private land, it is now all but impossible.

The Land & Liberty Coalition is unapologetically conservative in our advocacy for renewable energy policies that embrace property rights, drive economic opportunity, and safeguard sensitive ecosystems. As even the reddest of states and counties are proving, local wind and solar power projects are delivering affordable electricity, bringing in much-needed revenue, while helping to secure American energy independence.

Here in Maryland, meeting state renewable energy goals is now largely in the hands of county officials. They’ll have to decide whether to side with relative handfuls of vocal and politically connected residents, many of whom seem most interested in protecting their view of what they think a farm should look like. Or they can take the time to review the facts and adopt clean energy zoning regulations which reduce carbon emissions and preserve rural areas for the next generation while honoring property rights and increasing county revenue, things on which most of their constituents can agree.



Guest Commentary

Maryland Matters welcomes guest commentary submissions at editor@marylandmatters.org. We suggest a 750-word limit and reserve the right to edit or reject submissions. We do not accept columns that are endorsements of candidates or submissions from political candidates. Views of writers are their own.

[All posts by Guest Commentary](#)

Nonprofit. Nonpartisan. News you can trust.

Copyright © 2023 Maryland Matters
P.O. Box 11121, Takoma Park, MD 20913