

Sierra Club blow to climate change goes almost unnoticed in Springfield

DuPage legislators play significant role



River Prairie Group volunteers discuss renewable energy and energy efficiency with Rep. Chris Nybo (R-Elmhurst) in Springfield during Lobby Day, 2011.

The Sierra Club scored a significant blow against climate change in Springfield this spring. The success went almost unnoticed by the media and, as this article goes to press, appears subject to a veto by Governor Quinn. Tucked into the ComEd smart grid legislation was almost every renewable energy and energy efficiency measure for which Sierra Club volunteers lobbied.

While the US Congress wrung its hands over a season of horrific tornadoes, floods and droughts and then tried to block the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating greenhouse gasses, the Illinois General Assembly narrowly passed SB 1652 which actually does something to slow man-made production of the greenhouse gasses that are driving climate change.

Sierra Club volunteers lobbied all through last winter and spring for several separate bills that would remove impediments to renewable energy and energy efficiency and jumpstart Illinois' renewable energy economy. In other years, utilities, comfortable with their dependence on fossil fuels and nuclear energy, were able to tell politicians not to vote for these bills and except for a few courageous legislators, that was that. This year ComEd was asking for a rate hike to invest in the Smart Grid. Sierra Club volunteers were informed at their Issues Briefing last February that this was our best chance to get our greenhouse gas saving bills passed.

Although our bills enjoyed much support among legislators, they, as well as all significant energy-related legislation, languished for much of the Spring while legislative leaders debated and considered the ComEd Smart Grid proposal. In the end, Illinois Sierra Club Director Jack Darin was able to leverage all our volunteer efforts and work with a bipartisan group of legislators to get the sponsors of Smart Grid legislation to include our renewable energy and energy efficiency proposals in the bill.

DuPage Representatives Michael Fortner (R-West Chicago), Chris Nybo (R-Elmhurst), and Sandra Pihos (R-Glen Ellyn) were part of a bipartisan group of representatives that championed including clean energy in the package. Said Illinois Sierra Club Director Jack Darin, "Nybo, Fortner and Pihos were instrumental in making the case that renewable energy and energy efficiency measures were a crucial piece of any grid modernization bill that was truly smart."

Rep. Nybo said he was glad to help. "The measures that the Sierra Club wanted included in the bill made sense from an economic and environmental point of view. From the start I have been determined to fight for measures that help businesses and homeowners cut energy costs and bring green jobs and businesses to Illinois."

Rep. Pihos said, "Given that ComEd was closing in on the number of votes it needed to pass its bill, I thought we would be foolish not to leverage all we could get for a green outcome. People are only as healthy as their environment. The long term benefits of this bill will be huge."

Rep. Fortner said he is particularly proud of the work he did to get a net metering component in the final bill. "This will help small and mid sized businesses utilize their roof tops for solar energy," he said.

The heart of the ComEd bill is the Smart Grid. The Smart Grid is good for the environment in several ways. It allows consumers to cut their energy use as well as their bills by showing them where they are running up their use. It will waste less electricity by encouraging customers to switch energy use to off-peak hours, reducing the need for new power plants. No one has invented technology to store the electricity that is generated and not used, be it from a nuclear plant or a wind farm, yet power plants create the same amount of energy at 2 am when it is not needed as they do at 2 in the afternoon. To incentivize consumers to shift energy use to off-peak hours, energy costs less after midnight. But to realize off-peak savings, people have to have smart meters in their homes and businesses. Delaying energy use until after midnight does more than save money. A smart grid means that fewer power plants will be built, less coal mined and less greenhouse gas pumped uselessly into the atmosphere.

The Sierra Club's position on the Smart Grid was that we need a modernized grid to get to a clean energy future, but that any rate hikes incurred building infrastructure for it must be off-set with savings through renewable energy and efficiency programs. In the end, ComEd and the bill's sponsors agreed, and incorporated the renewable energy and efficiency proposals.

This is what the Sierra Club got written into the Smart Grid bill:

1. A huge impediment to roof-top solar was removed. During sunny days, many solar installations create more energy than they use. This energy net-meters back into the electrical grid and utilities sell it. Owners of the installation are not paid for the electricity they create, but instead get energy credits that are used at night when solar cells are not making energy. Previously, only small installations such as homeowners might have got a 1:1 credit. Larger installations got half the value of the electricity they net-metered into the grid. The amount of energy that could be net-metered into the grid was capped at one percent of the total amount used. Now larger renewable energy installations will get full value and the total renewables net-metered into the grid can rise to five percent. Every small business, big box store and warehouse in Illinois will be able to cut energy bills by installing solar. That translates into coal that will not be burned and greenhouse gasses that will not be created.
2. The Illinois Power Agency buys power for utilities in Illinois. The Sierra Club's contention is that the most cost effective and environmental response to power needs is to reduce the need for it. The IPA can now buy efficiency if efficiency is cheaper than power. This will hugely incentivize more efficient power use and save the planet much destructive CO₂.

3. The utilities have been under mandate to expand renewable energy to 25 percent of the total by 2025 since Sierra Club helped pass the Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard in 2007. Although this bill has brought many large wind farms to rural areas of Illinois, suburbs and urban areas have not seen the same economic benefit. Now a percentage of renewable energy must come from smaller distributed sources such as small businesses or homeowner rooftops.

At press time, Governor Quinn was considering SB 1652, and he has expressed major concerns about the bill's impact on electric rates. Hopefully Governor Quinn, who has long been a champion of both consumer protection and clean energy, can use his position to further improve the bill from a consumer perspective. That would give us a major leap forward for clean energy in Illinois, and a huge blow against climate change.

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