

Getting Closer to Green Power

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Pictured Above: Annabelle, Harry, and Olivia Roussel of Sag Harbor made signs this past spring to motivate Long Islanders to petition the state to get LIPA to change its power purchase structure.

Southampton Town has been leading the charge for the past three years to allow East End municipalities to demand their electricity comes from renewable sources, and has had some success in 2020.

Now, as their effort gains steam with Southampton Village, and East Hampton and Brookhaven towns passing legislation supporting what's known as "community choice aggregation (CCA)," renewable power activists are looking for one last push to get the New York State Legislature to approve the final piece in the puzzle of greening the existing electric grid.

On Dec. 23, 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed South Fork State Assemblyman Fred Thiele's legislation giving the state Public Service Commission control over the Long Island Power Authority, paving the way to require LIPA to allow more independent Energy Service Companies, known as ESCOs, to sell power to the Long Island grid.

ESCOs are independent energy supply companies that can sell power to a company that manages an electric grid. They are not involved with the transmission of the energy through the grid, which is currently managed by PSEG-Long Island. PSEG-Long Island has had its share of recent problems, particularly in its response to downed wires during Tropical Storm Isaias in the summer of 2020. ESCOs are not involved in the transmission and distribution of electricity, but in the generation of that electricity at the source.

ESCOs can produce their power in many different ways, but one of their primary uses is to provide renewable energy to the existing grid. They can also provide electricity at a cheaper price than a local utility company.

Mr. Thiele is planning to introduce a second bill this winter to change LIPA's fee structure so that ratepayers won't pay an extra five cent per kilowatt hour of electricity generated by ESCOs through LIPA's poorly utilized Long Island Choice Program.

Mr. Thiele has described that surcharge as a "poison pill" to greening the grid.

Proponents of CCAs are planning a major public engagement backing Mr. Thiele's new legislation this month.

"We're trying to give Long Islanders the same opportunity that every ratepayer has throughout the state," said Deputy Southampton Town Supervisor Frank Zappone, who is working with Sustainable Southampton Green Advisory Committee member Lynn Arthur on the town's CCA program. "LIPA has insisted that all ESCOs go through its Long Island Choice program, which has a convoluted and complicated pricing structure. It was designed to create competitive energy markets, but 15 years later, it's only attracted one ESCO to Long Island."

Southampton Town, the first town on Long Island to adopt CCA legislation, is calling its program Choice Community Power, and organizers are hoping that other local municipalities will join the program, giving Choice Community Power more leverage in obtaining bulk pricing when it begins to buy electricity. More information is online at choicecommunitypower.com.

The program is modeled after the Community Choice Aggregation Energy Program implemented in Westchester County in 2016, which now includes 26 municipalities. Organizers of that program estimated last year that more than 125,000 ratepayers there had saved more than \$13 million in total on their electric bills.

"We would issue a competitive bid for power supply," said Ms. Arthur. "Whomever is within the CCA group, they all collaborate on what terms they want to ask of the ESCO market. Volume is valuable."

Community Choice Power organizers are expecting ratepayers to save money through the program, and when it is up and running everyone within the municipality will be automatically enrolled unless they chose to opt out.

"When the program launches, a new entity gets created, with a local organization and a small call center where you can contact them," said Ms. Arthur. "Right now, Southampton is the only

member of Choice Community Power, but we hope soon other municipalities will be members of the consortium.”

Choice Community Power is being administered for Southampton Town by Joule Community Power, which set up the Westchester program back in 2016.

“At this point, there’s no cost to the municipality or the ratepayers,” said Mr. Zappone. “Any risk is taken by the CCA administrator.”

Both Southampton and East Hampton towns have set ambitious targets for powering their electric grid through renewable energy.

In 2014, East Hampton set a very ambitious goal to meet all its electrical energy needs using renewable energy by 2020 and to attempt to meet the town’s community-wide energy use in all sectors, including heating and transportation, through renewable energy sources by the year 2030. In 2017, Southampton Town set a goal that all the town’s electrical energy come from renewable sources by 2025.

Both goals are more ambitious than New York State, which in 2016 set a goal of producing 50 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by the year 2030, and in 2019 upped that goal to 70 percent by 2030.

While much of the public discussion locally has focused on the big boost offshore wind could bring to renewable energy goals, Mr. Zappone and Ms. Arthur believe Choice Community Power could be the key, in the short term, to meeting these targets even before wind projects off our coast come online, which is unlikely to happen until at least the end of 2022.

“If we are successful, we will meet our objective,” said Ms. Arthur of Southampton Town.

“The crux of the matter is, on Long Island, we’re not going to be able to get to some of these objectives without something like a CCA,” said Mr. Zappone. “Even if we get half of the aggressive wind farm projects up and running 5 to 10 years down the road, it’s not going to get us through.”

“The New York State Energy Research & Development Agency points to CCAs as the single most effective act a municipality can take to reduce our carbon footprint and provide access to renewable energy resources,” he added.