

LIPA To Vote On Community Choice Aggregation

By Desiree Keegan 5/19/2020 (The Independent)



The Roussel family — 12-year-old Olivia, Sustainable Southampton Green Advisory Committee member Helen, 14-year-old Harry and 12-year-old Annabelle with signs made of recycled cardboard asking LIPA to approve a Community Choice Aggregation program. Independent/Doug Kuntz

Long Island Power Authority Director of Communications Sid Nathan said “LIPA will recommend our board of trustees vote to approve Community Choice Aggregation at our meeting on Wednesday and welcomes the opportunity for community leaders to make energy choices they believe are appropriate for their constituents.”

That’s music to Southampton Town Councilman John Bouvier’s ears. The May 20 vote is on a proposal that provides a framework to allow Long Island communities to purchase energy from a wholesale supplier. Southampton, and the towns of East Hampton and Brookhaven have expressed similar interest.

“We have eight steps to get to where we want to get,” Bouvier said. “All of this is for us to assure ourselves that CCA will actually deliver to us what we want, and what we want is lower rates on a fixed price and the access to renewable sources of energy.”

The state Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act declared critical standards for the environment — 70 percent renewable electrical power supply by 2030. Southampton’s goal is to reach 100 percent renewable energy by 2025. “We see the CCA as a big step toward that,” Bouvier said.

Joule Assets, Inc., a state-certified Community Choice Aggregation administrator, was selected by Southampton in October 2019. The town was the first municipality on Long Island to award a contract to an administrator, having unanimously adopted the enabling legislation in November 2018. The move was a crucial one, allowing bid soliciting from energy suppliers with the goal of creating renewable electric energy purchasing options — be it wind, solar, or tidal — to provide a lower price per kilowatt hour than currently being offered by the Long Island Power Authority. PSEG Long Island will continue to be responsible for delivering the power to customers and ensuring that the electric grid remains safe and reliable, Nathan said.

“We have the third or fourth highest rate per kilowatt hour of any municipality in the nation — Long Island in particular,” Bouvier said. “It’s important that whatever we do, we end up being able to give our consumers a fixed price — a contract over 10 years or something like that — where they know what their bill is going to be.”

Community Choice Aggregation would be an opt-out program. It’s been successful in Westchester County, and is in operation in four other areas outside the LIPA region. Lynn Arthur, energy chair of the Sustainable Southampton Green Advisory Committee, said over 100 state municipalities have passed enabling legislation.

“But for us here, because we have this strange structure with LIPA, it’s not as easy to accomplish,” Bouvier said. “We need to get the data.”

He said there’s been conflict interpreting what consumption is.

“We have one of the highest residential HERS — Home Energy Rating System — ratings of any municipality in the state, actually nationally, so our consumption that we measure is pretty flat, if not declining,” Bouvier said. “But LIPA projections or forecasts are much different than what we’re seeing on the ground. We need to confirm that, and one of the ways to do that is to engage in Community Choice Aggregation so we’re able to see what our consumption is at the meter — have that data shared with us.”

Arthur said aside from significant public support, all six state utilities outside the LIPA region filed the same tariff on August 5, 2016.

“Almost three years in the making, the tariff would be ground-breaking and a victory for Long Islanders,” Arthur said. “The tariff enables a competitive market for electricity on Long Island and a choice Long Islanders do not have today. The next hurdle will be price.”

If LIPA passes the rule change to allow for the program, Joule Assets can begin soliciting bids. The hope is to incentivize local renewable power production.

A letter to LIPA board members from the town more than doubled its goal, receiving 1000 local signatures.

“I think it’s reflective that people are tired of opening their electrical bills and seeing these increases,” Bouvier said. “Just because ‘Hampton’ is at the end of Southampton doesn’t mean we don’t have a whole lot of residents that live paycheck to paycheck and are hardworking citizens hit with these bills that I think are sometimes prohibitive. Plus, we’d be producing power that’s not polluting the planet.”

State Assemblyman Fred Thiele and Suffolk County Legislator Bridget Fleming, who created a Community Choice Aggregation Task Force that Bouvier sat on, have been vocal about their support, as well as the New York State Department of Public Service and environmental groups like the Surfrider Foundation.

“When a community, or municipality, is given a choice of how and what types of energy it wants to purchase, the combined buying power of those customers — both residents and businesses — is impactful,” Fleming reiterated. “And if workable for municipalities on Long Island, the model may offer the opportunity for savings as well as choice.”

Pursuing Community Choice Aggregation could, if nothing else, signal to LIPA towns are committed to sustainable power sources, and push the company toward renewable power sources. On March 20, The New York Times reported the closing of the state’s last coal- fired power plant, Somerset Operating Company, citing the COVID- 19 pandemic made it too expensive to run.

“I think the LIPA board sees the writing on the wall — that clearly this is where we’re going and this is what we have to do for all sorts of reasons, from climate change to people’s pocketbooks,” Bouvier said. “I don’t see a downside here unless we can’t contract in a way that helps our consumers. I think this is the wave of the future.”